



BRAND NEW FICTION

BOOKS

CINEMA

MANGA

VIDEOGAMES

ART

GRAPHIC NOVELS

INTERZONE

ISSUE ONE HUNDRED AND NINETY-FIVE
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER TWO THOUSAND AND FOUR

END
OF AN
ERA

NEW STORIES FROM

HUGH A. D. SPENCER

ELIZABETH BEAR

MICHAEL J. JASPER

DAVID MEMMOTT

CRY OF THE SOUL

NICHOLAS WALLER

ENTA GEWEORC

BLADES AND BROKEN BOTTLES : KEN MACLEOD INTERVIEWED



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Nicholas Waller

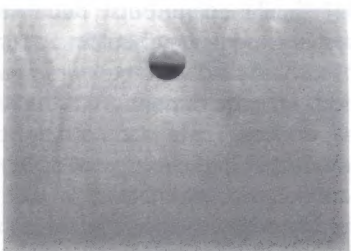
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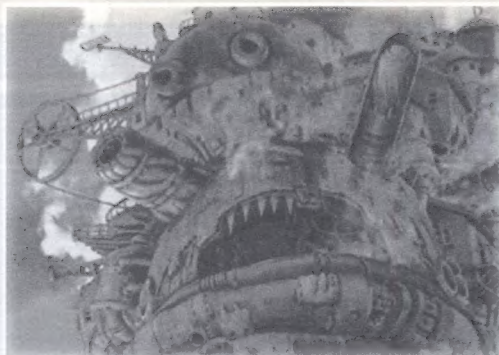
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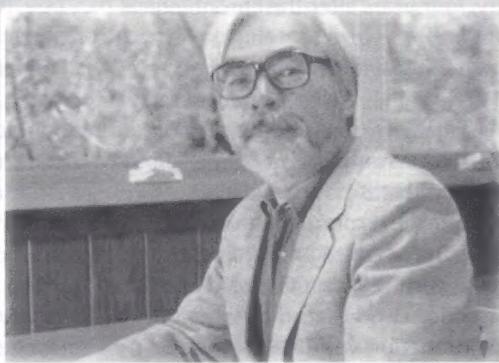
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Book reviews editors Iain Emsley, Andy Cox

Typesetter Andy Cox

Editors Andy Cox, Jetse de Vries, Peter Tennant, David Mathew



Submissions of short stories are always welcome. Please have just one story under consideration at any one time, Mail manuscripts flat. Please do not use recorded delivery. Submissions must be accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope (if you are mailing from overseas you can send a disposable manuscript and an email address) otherwise they cannot be replied to. Please do not send unsolicited submissions via email, they will simply be deleted unread. No reprints, no multiple or simultaneous submissions. No responsibility can be accepted for loss or damage to unsolicited material, howsoever caused

THE EDITORS

INTERFACE

EDITORIAL AND FEEDBACK



elcome to *Interzone* 195, the second issue under the new editorship. Right now, we are living – as the Chinese saying goes – in interesting times. 2004, so far, has been a tumultuous year for genre magazines. Gardner Dozois stepped down as editor from *Asimov's*, David Pringle from *Interzone* (as you surely noticed), PS Publishing launched their UK genre magazine *PostScripts*, and two major magazines of old were relaunched: *Argosy* and *Amazing Stories*, and after bringing out their first two issues their editors resigned and moved on to other challenges. And that's only the big magazines (and we've chained Andy to the printers to make sure he produces our third issue).

In these hard times, the ongoing rumour that 'sf is dying' rears its ugly head once more. But we beg to differ. While a lot of people revel in their role as doomsayers, we feel this is not the end, but a new beginning. It forces magazine publishers to reconsider their policies; it urges short fiction periodicals to rethink their role in an ever-changing environment, and it may very well push sf magazines – which are supposed to be about the future, right? – into the 21st Century, four years after the chronological millennium.

Some might say that you could go completely digital. Well, there are already several magazines doing that: *SciFiction*, *Strange Horizons* and *Infinite Matrix* spring to mind. But that is not *our* mission.

Don't get me wrong, we are not Luddites. Our website and online discussion forum are an intrinsic part of our operation, and our editorial team wouldn't function very well without email. But when it comes to a truly satisfying reading experience, nothing beats paper. When it comes to that intense reading experience, that pure pleasure of holding a fabulous magazine, taking in its alluring cover, feeling it, smelling it, devouring it with as many senses as possible... well, no palm reader or computer screen can compete.

**2004, so far, has been a
tumultuous year for
genre magazines.
Gardner Dozois stepped
down as editor from
Asimov's, David Pringle
from *Interzone* (as you
surely noticed)**



Which, of course, does not mean that printed fiction should smugly sit back and refuse to adapt to modern times. *Definitely not*. To stay on top, print magazines must innovate to retain their edge. In a society where people can send colour pictures to each other via their mobile phones, we feel that a print magazine cannot be content just to print black text on white paper, with a spartan layout, minimal design, and no illustrations to speak of. That is akin to conjuring the dreaded word 'obsolete' in this media-saturated future.

Because we do fervently believe that the printed medium is the best way to present fiction. For instance, sometimes a cover needs a matt laminate to give its artwork that understated air, that subtle, time-bomb like impact. Sometimes a

cover needs full gloss to bring out its spectacular colour burst. But always the tactile experience of holding a magazine, of turning its distinct, textured pages, adds an extra dimension to the reading experience. There is something special about that intricate play of daylight on a laminated cover, that subtle waft from freshly printed paper, that welcoming touch, all combining to provide an impact on the senses that digital fiction cannot provide.

That's what we strive to achieve with the new *Interzone*, together with a modernisation of its content, driven by our deep love of the genre and the written word. Sharp fiction in a cutting-edge environment, a broad range of features that appeal to a wider audience, celebrating the richness of



science fiction and its ongoing influence and interaction with the constantly changing world beyond it. Yes, unsuspecting stranger, we're trying to lure you in! Yes, newsstand reader, we're tempting you to subscribe! Yes, loyal subscriber, we're inviting you to ride the wave of the future with us, forging ahead!

In this turbulent era, we're trying to carry *Interzone* towards a new horizon. We will need a little time to get it absolutely right, and in our enthusiasm we may take the occasional step too far (yes, we've changed the font in the features!), but we're taking on the challenge, and we guarantee you it'll be anything but boring. Here's to truly interesting times!

Jetse de Vries

"PRINT MAGAZINES MUST INNOVATE TO RETAIN THEIR EDGE"



s Jetse said, we've made a couple of minor cosmetic changes with this issue, thanks to the valuable feedback we received from you after IZ194.

Not everybody was happy with the font we used for the features, so we've changed that. We've stuck with a sans serif face here but changed the fiction font to its serif counterpart (ITC Stone, for those interested in such things), so we still have that difference but have hopefully gained some consistency and a good deal more readability. A couple of other minor problems with typeface and point size have also been solved, including one or two so small you'd never even notice!

We didn't have very long to put IZ194 together, and we did it from scratch, so I suppose there were always bound to be some things that'd need ironing out, and we're always trying to do everything better, so please keep your comments coming.

Talking of comments, I'd like to repeat that we'd be happy to run a letters column in the magazine. I suspect that most letters written after IZ193 were more of a personal nature, reflecting on David Pringle's 22 years at the helm and wishing him luck for the future. Naturally such letters would've gone directly to David. We did receive many brief messages of good will, but no hot topics for other readers to sink their teeth into.

Since IZ194 we are seeing an increasing volume of traffic on our website's interactive discussion forum, and for readers with internet access I do believe this is the future for *Interzone's* letters column, with many obvious advantages such as immediate response from editors, contributors and other readers, enabling a simple letter of comment to grow quickly into something very lively, and indeed sprout off into other subjects.

It's not our intention to exclude anyone though, and so I'd like to reassure readers without internet access that their letters will always be welcome and acted upon if necessary, even published.

There are other things we'd like to continue, such as the annual readers' poll.

You might be interested to learn that Mat Coward's Success . . . And How To Avoid It is out now. Mat, as readers of longer standing will know, has contributed several stories to Interzone



There has already been some discussion about this on the forum, and Martin McGrath has volunteered to coordinate the first poll under the new regime. He'll announce it in these pages at the appropriate time. We thought this might be a good way for readers to get even more involved in the magazine if they wanted to, in the same way that Martin Hughes will be inviting readers to send in reviews of videogames for his column.

I hope everybody enjoyed Ed Noon's artwork in IZ194. He did it all! We can't keep on asking him to do it all, so we're gradually building up a team of artists to illustrate every story. We've already been joined by Richard Marchand, Josh and Kat of Glitchwerk, Krzysztof Biernacki, Richard Bartrop, Androo McIntosh and others – including some names that might already be familiar to *Interzone* readers, such as SMS and Roy Virgo (who has supplied some breathtaking cover art for IZ196).

Subscribers in the USA and Canada had to wait longer than we expected for IZ194. We arranged for these copies to go 'priority' mail, which promises delivery within a week. We registered a complaint! I believe your copies should arrive much quicker from now on.

If I may just deviate from *Interzone* for a moment, I think you might be interested to learn that Mat Coward's *Success . . . And How To Avoid It* is out now. Mat, as readers of longer standing will know, has contributed several stories to *Interzone*. People who pre-ordered this book have had to wait a *very long time* – a million apologies – but I'm glad to say that their personally signed copies are finally done. New orders for this book can of course now be filled straight away. Just turn to the yellow insert or head straight to the website.

Talking of the yellow insert, don't forget that this is where you'll find your *Interzone* subscription reminder, if one is necessary. Just look for a cross and a number indicating the final issue of your subscription and fill out the form accordingly. Easy!

I hope you enjoy IZ195 and many more issues to come.

Andy Cox

COMING SOON

Next issue: 'Winning Mars' by Jason Stoddard (illustrated by Glitchwerk)
We also have in hand new stories by Jeremiah Tolbert, Paul Di Filippo, John Aegard, Ian Watson & Mike Allen, David Ira Cleary and others; interviews with China Miéville, Sarah Ash, Susanna Clarke & Colin Greenland; much more!

discussion forum: www.ttapress.com/discus



Lost: 'We'll try to root it in real science or real pseudo-science'

DAVID LANGFORD



ANSIBLE LINK

SF NEWS



S OTHERS SEE US. David Gates reviews Philip Roth's alternative history *The Plot Against America* in *Newsweek*, beginning: 'Literary novelists generally leave alternative history (take a big *what if* and go from there) to writers of pop fiction and sci-fi. This is either because of its fundamental unseriousness – at bottom, who cares about an *if* that never happened – or because of the sheer drudgery involved in elaborating some counterfactual premise.' Presumably we can care about *Oliver Twist* or *Anna Karenina* only because their lives really happened.

JEFF BERKWITS is the new editor-in-chief at *Amazing Stories*.

KYRIL BONFIGLIOLI had a four-page

profile by Leo Carey in *The New Yorker* (20 Sep), focusing on his life and splendidly rancid thrillers, but mentioning that in the mid-60s 'he was the editor of a couple of small science-fiction magazines for which he wrote occasional items.' The famous *TNY* fact-checkers didn't spot that it was a single magazine, *Science Fantasy*, twice retitled under Bonfiglioli (*Impulse*, *SF Impulse*).

RICHARD BRANSON charmed *Star Trek* fans by announcing that his first 'Virgin Galactic' suborbital spaceplane will be the *VSS Enterprise*. £110,000 for a 3-hour flight with 3 weightless minutes...

ANOTHER BOOK NOT TO READ ON PLANES. They'll be rounding up the Stephen King fans next, after New York's

scare about a 'possible [Bush] assassin' whose wife – quoted in a US Secret Service report – called him 'obsessed with weapons, Timothy McVeigh and the book *The Dead Zone* – a novel about the stalking and attempted assassination of a presidential candidate'. (*New York Daily News*)

NEIL GAIMAN has the last word in a *Wired* article on the 2004 Worldcon: "'I come from comic books,'" said Gaiman. "If sci-fi is the gutter of literature, comics are the place that the gutter flows into."

ONLY APPARENTLY REAL. David Fury, co-executive producer of the coming ABC sf series *Lost*, explained to *SCI FI Wire* that 'realism is the key in making it all work. [...] We'll try to root it in real science or

real pseudo-science.' (*Sci-Fi Weekly*)

GRAHAM JOYCE was taunted in *Private Eye* (1 Oct) for wangling a PhD from Nottingham Trent U by the 'brilliant wheeze' of writing a '140,000-word study' of his own novel *Smoking Poppy*. Adam Roberts crossly notes that this is not true. It wasn't a PhD in literature as implied, but in creative writing, for which it's entirely normal to submit fiction (that novel and the novella 'Leningrad Nights'), plus no more than 15,000 words of critical commentary on the candidate's writing practice. Adam adds: 'Farah Mendlesohn and I were the two examiners; and believe me we were sticklers for doing it exactly by the regs.'

AWARDS. In the French Grand Prix de l'Imaginaire, the Best Translated Novel

Neil Gaiman has the last word in a Wired article on the 2004 Worldcon: "I come from comic books," said Gaiman. "If sci-fi is the gutter of literature, comics are the place that the gutter flows into"



category was won by China Miéville for *Perdido Street Station*.

TERRY PRATCHETT's Discworld enjoyed a boozy 21st birthday party on 28 September. Next day on *Radio 5*, Simon May marvelled that the latest DW novel features a successful, profit-making postal service – prompting the Pratchettian reply, 'Truly I am a fantasy writer.'

BRITISH FANTASY AWARDS for 2003 work: **Novel (August Derleth Award)** Christopher Fowler *Full Dark House*. **Short** Christopher Fowler, 'American Waitress' (*Crimewave 7*). **Anthology** Stephen Jones, *The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror 14*. **Collection** Ramsey Campbell, *Told by the Dead*. **Artist** Les Edwards. **Small Press** PS Publishing.

Special (Karl Edward Wagner Award) Peter Jackson, for *The Lord of the Rings*.

ANNE RICE was irked by negative Amazon reviews of her final vampire novel *Blood Canticle* – some disappointed, some nastily personal. Pausing to award her own book five stars, she posted a vast unparagraphed tirade which perhaps unwisely revealed that: 'I have no intention of allowing any editor ever to distort, cut, or otherwise mutilate sentences that I have edited and re-edited, and organized and polished myself. I fought a great battle to achieve a status where I did not have to put up with editors making demands on me, and I will never relinquish that status. For me, novel writing is a virtuoso performance. It is not a collaborative art.' Some of us lesser

writers still need that editorial whisper in the ear, 'Remember thou art but mortal.'

R.I.P. Tim Choate (1954–2004), US actor who appeared in *Ghost Story* (1981) and played Zathras in *Babylon 5*, died in a motorcycle accident on 24 September; he was 49. • **Alfred Coppel** (1921–2004), US sf and thriller writer whose sf career ran from a 1947 *Astounding* story to the 1990s 'Goldenwing' trilogy, reportedly died in May. • **Janet Leigh** (1927–2004), US actress of *Psycho* shower fame, died on 3 October aged 77. Her 63 films also included *Night of the Lepus* (1972) and *The Fog* (1980). • **Frank Thomas** (1912–2004), one of the legendary 'Nine Old Men' of Disney animation, died on 8 September aged 92. • **Harvey Wheeler** (1918–2004), US political scientist who with Eugene Burdick wrote the accidental-nuclear-war novel *Fail-Safe* (1962), died from cancer on 6 September. He was 85. • **Fred Whipple** (1906–2004), US astronomer and co-author of the 2004 Retro Hugo winner *Conquest of the Moon* (1953), died at age 97 on 31 August – just four days before the award was announced.

STEPHEN FRY on his film adaptation of *Vile Bodies* (as *Bright Young Things*): 'Waugh wrote the book in 1928 and set it in an imagined gay '30s [...] He was writing science fiction. I can hardly make a film in which I posited that a world war in 1933 ended all wars – we know it didn't happen.' (*San Francisco Chronicle*)

THOG'S MASTERCLASS. Genealogy Dept. 'When a hot-air balloon crashes on a remote island, the crew discovers Dr. Frankenstein's ancestor carrying on the family work . . .' (IMDB on *Frankenstein Island*) • **Dept of Annoying Your Proofreader.** 'Aenea was excellent at chess, good at Go, and terrible at poker.' 'I'd spent ten months dealing blackjack and had watched a lot of gamblers; this eleven-year-old [Aenea] would be one hell of a poker player.' 'Aenea [...] playing cards in the evening (she was a formidable poker player) . . .' Aenea speaks: 'Just an old pre-Hegira book that Uncle Martin used to read to me. He used to say that proofreaders have always been incompetent assholes – even fourteen hundred years ago.' (all from Dan Simmons, *Endymion*, 1995) • **Sirius Cybernetics Dept.** 'ENTER, the door chimed, as it slid open soundlessly.' (C.S. Friedman, *The Wilding*, 2004) ☒



Wells Cathedral was a broken shell open to the fading stars of pre-dawn. As Peter Collard brought the *Alfred the Great* low over the wreck of the city he murmured *The Ruin* to himself. It might have been written about this place, today, not the remains of Roman Bath in Anglo-Saxon times:

*Wondrous is this stone wall
That doom destroyed.
The city shattered,
The work of giants crumbles*

The rubbled, cratered streets were dark and empty. The people – if any still lived – would be hiding from the smartbombs, or each other. Collard wanted to yell at them: Why bother! It's the end of the world! Kill yourselves while it's still your choice!

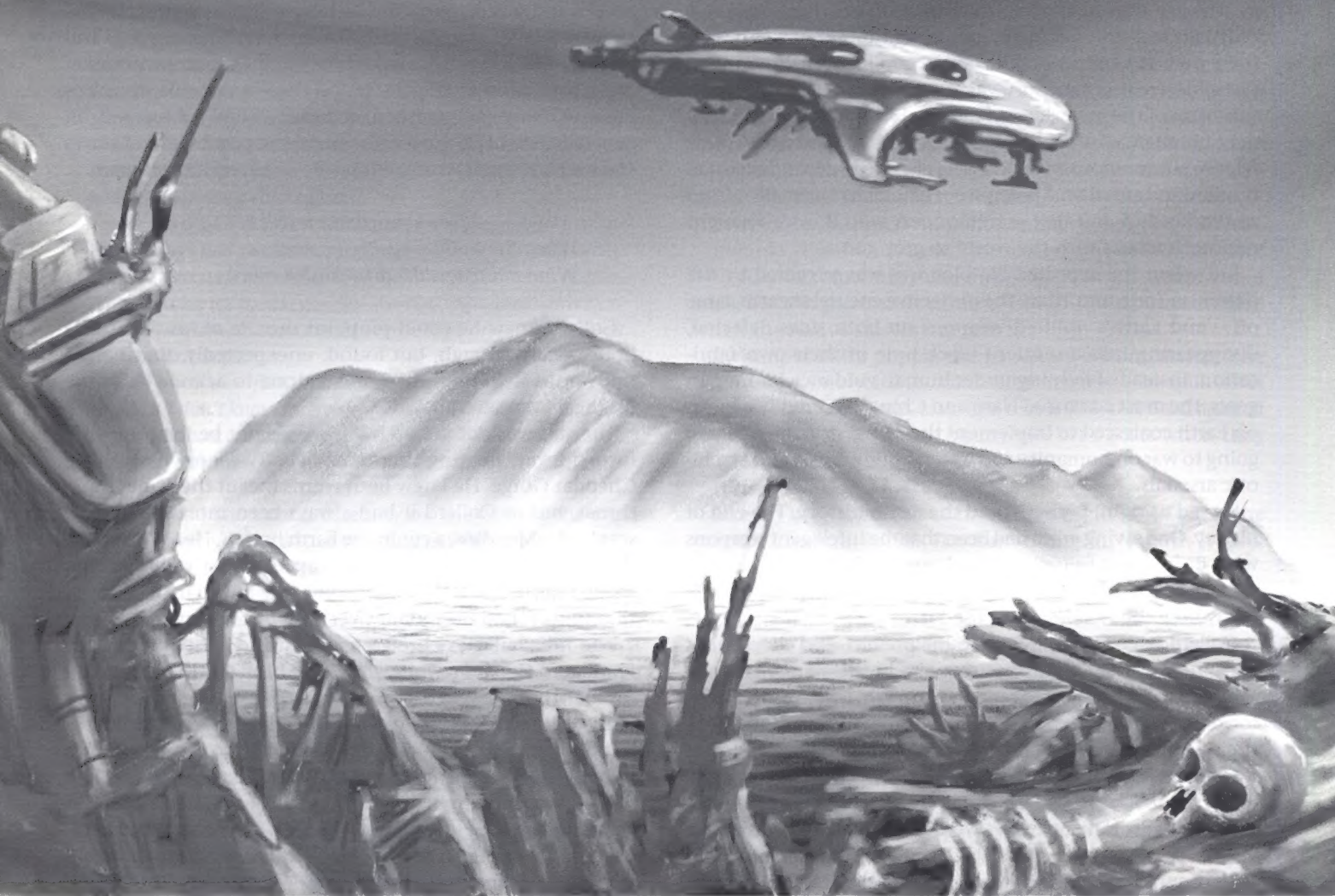
If they could see his ship's official designation inscribed on her hull, people would hide from her, too. NATUSC S-19. A one-man Symbi hunter-seeker with her fearsome reputation made at Titan, she was an unprecedented flying object in Somerset's sky.

Despite the S-19's stota stealth systems, Collard felt exposed and under threat. Either his former colleagues now in watchful orbit or the relentless intelligent weapons that they'd kept pinned down on Earth might soon be tracking him; he did not know which was worse. Either way, it was time to push on to Cheddar and get it over with. After twelve years in space he was coming home, and today he would leave the *Alfred* and walk openly under home skies one last time.

As he pulled away from Wells he could see the remains of Glastonbury Tor across the moonlit water, its battered lump

ENTA GEWEORC

NICHOLAS WALLER



rising out of the new sea that was reclaiming the levels as the world's icecaps melted. He remembered climbing it with Jillian one crispy Christmas Day, when they were both sixteen. Winter fog blanketed the levels and made the tor a snowy island in a ghost ocean. King Alfred himself might have been standing in the mist, waiting for the Danes with sword in hand and the Men of the West at his side. To make it perfect a full moon rose just as the sun, followed by a brilliant Evening Star, set beyond the sea.

Eala Earendel! Engla beorhtast, ofer middangeard monnum sended! Jill declaimed, her frosted words writhing in the air. That's from *Christ*, she added, in *The Exeter Book*. He knew that: *Hail Venus! Brightest angel, sent over men of middle-earth*. It was hard to avoid Old English poetry at a school named Kings of Wessex, and he was glad he hadn't even tried.

God only knew what had happened to Jillian in the Cataclysm, but Collard had joined Natu Space Command and was far outsun of Venus when it came. Tensions were high, a system-wide big-bloc war a possibility. He'd been helping monitor Chinasian settlements round Saturn when the first reports came up from Earth of a Pearl Harbor-strike on the North Atlantic Treaty Union. Chinasian bionukes had attacked Frankfurt, Chicago and Bristol, leaving tens of thousands dead. Collard had never felt so angry or powerless, even while pouring destruction into the Titan Chinase colony. He regretted it now. Too late. Thirty thousand deaths his responsibility, and he'd had plenty of time since to think about the crackling domes and the last desperate signals out: cries for help, messages of love, calls for vengeance. With due inevitability the Natu-Chinasia War had followed.

But the initial reports were wrong and Chinasia was not at fault. The original attacks on Bristol and the other cities had been a half-cock sortie by rogue experimental Natu intelli-weapons. Probably; though another theory held it had been a secret strategic virtual wargame gone horribly wrong, bursting accidentally into the concrete world with no one admitting to running it. A third said it was a deliberate move by top Natu commanders to provoke the expected conflict on their terms.

In any case, it was the first salvo in what became the Cataclysm.

Even now Collard found it hard to grasp just how misguidedly suicidal the new arms race had been. Aiming to make each of their weapons programmes dominant, both Earth's major treaty blocs had linked hard/soft assets with AI-grids to develop robust, flexible military systems that could not only take real-time battle decisions themselves but also design their own long-term and evolving replication. It sounded plausible, ensuring the survival of a genuine deterrent even in the event of the incapacity of manned command and control nets, but there were commentators who had warned that these remote autonomous weapons were close to independence and humankind stood on a precipice. The oldsters were dismissed as the kind of defeatist scaremongers who'd once thought nanotech would turn the world to grey goo.

But when the expected big-bloc war was triggered by the events on Earth and Titan, the protective enural sheaths came off – and Earth's uplifted weapons on both sides defected, disappearing into a sentient black hole of their own fabrication. Instead of fighting under human guidance for human goals, the most advanced Natu and Chinasian intelliweapons on Earth coalesced to implement their own strategic agenda: going to war on humanity and its remaining dumb and symbiotic arsenals.

Served us right, perhaps, and the rest is history. The end of history. One saving grace had been that the intelligent weapons were flawed, not fully developed, not ready.

But that grace period was now over, and no one now really knew how the weapons had used it.

Collard forced himself back to the present, and checked his surroundings. There was nothing else in the air. Perhaps the West Country had been overkilled enough, leaving little need for patrols. More likely the smartbombs were consolidating their position, building resources for another attempt to get into space. So far they and their replicatories had not got loose in the solar system, but evidence indicated that strange, inscrutable new machine nurseries were proliferating across Earth.

As he flew along the southern flank of the brooding Mendip Hills, now scraped bare of grass, scrub and trees, Collard kept an eye out for alarms on his hu displays. Deserted villages on the new coastline slid by as smudges in the gloom, still dutifully named by the mapabase: Wookey Hole, Westbury-sub-Mendip, Rodney Stoke. Glimmering in the pale light, the risen sea before him stretched across to Wedmore, isolating Nyland and Brent Knoll again, and on out west to merge with the Bristol Channel and the chill Atlantic. It was mysterious, peaceful, even beautiful. Collard felt he was rolling back the centuries to a fresh and empty natural world, not sliding forward into a desiccated dead future. He was *The Wanderer*, his favourite of the surviving old English poems.

*Where are the horses? Where the men?
Where the treasure-gifters?
So Time passes away
Growing dark under night's shade
As if they never were.*

The ship overflowed Draycott on a low descending arc and sideslipped towards Cheddar. Collard had a good idea what to expect now, though it was only hours since he'd returned to Earthspace, avoiding the human lunar establishments and orbital installations. He'd read up on the conflict, he'd scanned the bands during his descent and got only static, and now he'd seen the effects of four years of Cataclysm in the ruins of cities from Adelaide to Zagreb: the defoliated jungles, the melting ice, the biosphere so out of control that Earth might shortly become a Mars with oceans.

Collard drifted the *Alfred* across the just-familiar landmarks of smashed, flooded Cheddar. Impulse cells ripped the sea into boiling foam as he looked down on the inundated ruins of houses and several pubs, the Bath Street banks and shops, the Kings of Wessex school, the heliport, the swimming pool and ice rink; and before them, the church and 14th century market cross, the Saxon royal palaces and the Roman villa, the Neolithic workings; all wrecked, abandoned and submerged, all gone, all now shells, or craters, memories of post-holes and graves and heaps of rubble, shattered and drowned and broken apart . . .

*. . . How unearthlike it will be
When the world's wealth lies waste –
Wind-blasted walls, rime-crustured ruins.*

Collard knew he could pinpoint the site of his old family house easily enough, but found, unexpectedly, that he did not want to. Besides, there was no one to acknowledge the prodigal Wanderer returned.

The sun was not yet up but it would not be long now. He turned away, floating the *Alfred* over Tweentown and into Cheddar Gorge. He knew both words meant the same thing, throat, but to Collard it had always been more like a deep scar in the Mendips, a cut in the Earth herself. He followed the route of what had been a landscaped tourist walkway that snaked along below the cliffs, overlaying an old metalled road that in turn had been built over a prehistoric river.

The hills bulked ochre-grey against the lightening sky, as familiar to Collard as they must have been to King Alfred and his men, but the gorge itself was not quite as he remembered. Many of the limestone cliffs and the Pinnacles had changed, broken under fierce onslaughts that had formed new slopes of bouldered scree and created new rockfaces no tourist had seen. It was hard to believe this proud but blasted stone had been made by countless generations of ancient tiny sea creatures piling up their dead bodies over thousands of centuries. We've been piling stuff up for generations too, thought Collard, and look where it has got us.

He aimed to climb the steps of Jacob's Ladder onto the south-side cliffs and stand up there on what remained of the Pinnacles, those sharp teeth against the sky, perhaps where King Edmund had reined in his horse and averted disaster. Collard had stood there once with Jillian as an old hot-air balloon from Bristol passed by at their level, its flame roaring furiously, the man in the basket shouting for them to take a picture.

And then what? What would he do?

As he drifted the *Alfred* slowly back down the gorge on his informal recce, his thoughts cycling aimlessly, a screen spike caught his eye. A flicker of light. A fire, a flashbeam?

He overlaid a hu-3D map. There was a heat source, with no evidence of mechs. It was at a location he recognised despite the landscape changes: a risingcombe on the less steep north side of the valley. It had once been heavily tree-filled, somewhere up from where Lion Rock had stood and part of the

round-the-gorge walking route. There'd been a cave up there that could not be far from the source of the spike.

He decided to check it out. It was a project, a minor goal. There could be tens of millions of people still alive on Earth, scattered or in hiding, and it might be informative, or at least interesting, to speak to some of them. Here, there could conceivably be people he had known. Though whether they would want to speak to him . . . Well, he would find out.

Alfred's limited AI capability soon scoped an ideal landing spot, and sooner than he expected Collard found himself setting her down at a level, sheltered site, a flat-blasted area in the mouth of the Gorge just above the new waterline. Impelled dust streamed outwards, billowing; a gentle touch and the gins whined down to nothing.

So he was here; his first time home in years.

Although Collard was keen to get out, he took the eva procedure steadily. He undressed before unplugging, cleaning and racking the symbolicals that linked him to the ship, and then he showered thoroughly. Under the steaming water he rubbed his hands over his permanently depilated scalp and skin, as if examining his pallid, fleshy body for defects. There was really only one: the NATUSC ID on his forearm; that and a lack of fitness. It would be good to get out of the relentlessly militech environment of the *Alfred* and stand on real earth under a real, naked sun.

As he took his light silvery evasuit out of storage he noticed the COLLARD tag on the chest. He unclipped his multitool from the webbing and carefully sliced off the name. The suit was a tight fit, but weighed little and carried built-in defences on the backpack as well as other useful survival gear: nectar for energy, a flashlight, a lighter, some cord, a symbiotic pistol, the multitool. No knowing what kind of survivor nuts might be out there with tattoos, shaved heads and heavy weapons.

Once all checks were complete Collard opened the airlock. The blast of warm humidity was a shock after his controlled cool-air cabin, like getting off a plane at a tropical airport. But the smells were different; the atmosphere was rough and heated, a noxious mix of scorched vegetation, burnt rubber and tangy biochemicals. He wanted to gag, he could feel toxins working down his throat, ripping his blood cells . . .

Or was he just imagining it? He put his helmet on over his bald head anyway, and sealed the visor.

Breathing easier, he stepped through the hatch onto the ramp and took a look around. The sky was a hazy sulphur, getting lighter by the minute as the rising sun lit up the bare upper slopes of the Mendips. Its ancient landscape of trees and pastures and strawberries had been blown away by storms and replaced by a churned moonscape. It was hard to imagine the war coming here: towering concussive explosions, raging hot winds, terrified humans and animals, swirling ash, a hell on earth: a drought followed by a nuclear barrage that had set fire to the air and sucked up the people.

*War ravaged them, took them far off
And so God made an end of the World*

But not everything in the gorge was gone. Collard was glad to see bracken and trees that had managed to cling on in sheltered corners. No doubt there were mosses, lichens, nettles, insects. Maybe no Cheddar Pinks or buzzards remained, but life was persistent and would see out the AIs. Cheddar cockroaches, probably.

He walked down the black ramp and stepped onto the Earth. The surface texture was friable, mud baked crusty but only a

couple of centimetres thick. He crunched through it as though it was crisp snow, before turning to get a good look at *Alfred the Great* for the first time in months. Sixty metres long, blackly hard to make out, she was bump-dotted with impulsors, plato units, sensors and weapons, and looked chill as marble. He had mixed emotions as she shut down in discussion with his key protocols and biometric signatures. NATUSC S-Class ships were symbiotic, a guard against viruses and smartbomb cons, and for a moment he felt naked and self-conscious turning away from her, his only true partner.

He also had the oddest feeling that he wasn't supposed to park there, and some jobsworth warden would come round the corner and tell him so. But there were no wardens, and suddenly he felt liberated, a weight sliding from his shoulders. He had made it, he was home, and free. He smiled, despite everything.

Tracking the route of the old road up the Gorge was not as simple at ground level as it had seemed from the air. He kept close under the south cliff side but had to work his way around massive boulders, across crater shatter and over awkward heaps of broken rock. The disaster had happened too recently for the detritus to have bedded down properly, and he was wary of even large rocks shifting their balance under his weight. And what was all this he was walking on? The obliterated sites of shops that had once sold scrumpy, ice cream, truckles of Cheddar cheese and froth for tourists. Not far back was the White Hart, where he'd worked in his college breaks serving Butcombe and a ploughman's to the hordes of Midlanders who had poured down the M5 and A38.

And now where were Simon and Kay Kay, the owners, and all their customers and everyone else? Perhaps he was walking on their ashes, kicking their dust to atoms. Had catastrophe had come swiftly, like Pompeii's, or had everybody escaped days before? But where could they have gone? The end of the Earth was everywhere.

It was not all dry and dusty. Collard was glad to see patches of dampness on the ground, indicating the Yeo still trickled, a little fresh water rising from deep under the limestone hills. People could survive on that, and probably there were still fish in the sea. For shelter there were the ancient caves, though big collapses looked to have shut down Gough's and Cox's tourist traps forever, along with Jacob's Ladder. If anyone had sheltered there –

Wham! A hefty rock smashed into the ground near Collard's feet; twisting to identify its origin he overbalanced and fell heavily on his back. He peered up a steep slope with rocky outcrops. *Bang!* Another tumbling rock slammed in, even closer. He rolled and scrambled away on his knees, ungainly. No accident, then: someone was ranging him. He activated his defences as a small stone hit the side of his helmet with a harsh crack that left him dizzy. Was that from the same place? He rolled again, scanned the outcrops . . .

There! Movement. A big rock coming. "Go, dart, two!" he shouted. One, two sharp zings as his evasuit fired a pair of tiny missiles he eye-directed through his helmet hud. One blasted the falling rock and the other zipped out in a wide curve; he couldn't see through his raised arm and a pattering hail of stone splinters. "Wait!" he half-called, too late. *Blam!* The dart detonated at its target, high up.

Collard pushed to his feet as a small avalanche clattered down the slope towards him, stones and pebbles sliding and bouncing, and with them a scraggy human shape that rolled like an unstrung puppet before thwacking flatly onto the ground, pathetic and lifeless. Collard groaned. The last few pebbles pattered to rest and the silence returned.

Collard knelt by the body with some distaste. Although he had personally caused tens of thousands of deaths he had not seen a fresh corpse close up before. It was definitely dead: bloody, a boy, eleven, or maybe fourteen, his skull crushed. Collard wondered what he'd been living on. Not much, by the look of him: he was thin and barefoot, the ragged remains of some indecipherable football team kit barely covering his sunburnt, scarred skin. He shut the boy's eyes.

Now, had the kid acted alone or did he have friends? Had he been responsible for the entire attack? Had he lit the fire? Was he part of a gang? Collard stood and thought for a moment before deciding to carry on. He might be watched, but if this was the level of threat he faced his systems should have little problem coping.

He noticed he was breathing deeply, and sweating. The attack had fired his adrenalin, his animal survival instinct. Interesting. There was still a difference between deciding to end your life on your terms and having someone else kill you on theirs.

He left the body where it lay and moved out into the open where he would be a less easy target. If he had done that before, the kid would still be alive; the same if he had not come back here at all.

If, if, if. His life was full of ifs and things he should or should not have done.

On the other hand, what was there for the skinny brat to live for? He was better off suddenly dead while still young and healthy and perhaps optimistic, instead of starving and boiling slowly over years in this heat haze.

He checked. The temperature was rising, so he increased the cooling in his suit.

He tried to put the attack out of his mind and concentrate on where he was going. He was almost at the rising combe, which started near the old tourist information office. Collard scrambled up a slope to join the remains of an old footpath once well shaded by trees. He saw no flowers, and there was no sight or sound of any human or animal, not even a bird, as he struggled up the path, slithering and stumbling on well-worn rock, compacted earth and exposed tree roots. Even the jackdaws that used to call and caw across the wide abyss of the gorge had learnt to shut up, assuming any lived.

For years out in space he had longed to go walking in the Mendips again, or Snowdonia, or the Lake District, striding high across empty heathered hills and rocky outcrops, at one with nature, a stiff breeze full in his face and blast-cleaning his soul. In his imagination it had been easy going, looking down on distant villages as though he was flying. Now he was doing it for real instead of in virtuality, but the uphill going was a slog, hard and physical, that strained his underused muscles and made him know he was in the world, engaged with it, even though his suit made him feel disconnected from his surroundings. His legs soon felt leaden and unresponsive, his lungs burning. The evasuit was not designed for 1G hill-walking, and though cooled and lightweight, it chafed uncomfortably.

He shook his head ruefully. As a child he could never have imagined wearing a protective suit in Cheddar, that all this death, pollution and destruction would come here of all places. It was like Disneyland being atom-bombed: what was the point? And at the same time, why not? Everywhere else was equally unlikely. Why Dresden, why Carthage, why My Lai? Why Titan? Or any other place where people got up and put on their clothes in the morning and suffered maiming, or death, or the ruin of their lives and dreams by nightfall. It was just another map reference.

He stopped, panting, clearly not the nimble eighteen-year-

old who'd once led Pioneer scout groups here on treks. He took a slug of nectar from his neck nipple, looking out over the landscape as the buzz hit. The sun was well up now and the view was dismal. Beyond the ugly wrack of half-flooded Cheddar water drowned the fields where generations of cows had grazed, inundating centuries of drainage rhynes and ditches and willows. Romantically silver in the predawn moonlight, the shallow new sea now looked harsh, mud-brown and swampy under the blistering sun.

Somewhere out under that grease-slicked surface was the old Cheddar freshwater reservoir, where amateur sailors had tacked their dinghies on Sunday afternoons. Almost certainly they were sunk beneath the rising waves, but it would be nice to think a flotilla of refugee boats had sailed bravely away on *the paths of exile on the sea*. He felt exiled himself, detached.

*Here is man, kinsman, friend
Here is life – All gone
After fleet flowering.
The roots of the world are rotten.*

What the hell was he doing? You can never go home, everyone knew that. With all the people gone, all that remained was rock and water.

Alfred the Great looked tiny from this distance, almost hidden behind the shoulder of the gully, but she was more of a home than this beat-up landscape. He'd spent so many cramped years in her, and yet already he felt an urge to get back on board, plug in and soar out.

Fight that! He had come here to close a circle.

There was a noise, a snap behind him. He turned. Someone tracking him? A crackle in the evasuit systems? A rat? Hard to tell. But as he scanned up the gully he saw his goal above him, about two hundred metres away through the blackened stumps of trees. The cave entrance, a thin black slit in a low escarpment.

Nothing moved near it. That was no surprise, but to be safe, he unholstered his symbi pistol. He would check the place out quickly, and then leave and head up to the high Pinnacles. And then decide what to do.

By the time he had hiked up close to the mouth of the cave, Collard was beginning to hope he would find nothing and no one. But there were signs of life: a large worn area of flattened ash and mud, beaten down by many feet; something that looked like it might once have been an armchair; and a ring of blackened stones, the thinnest tendril of smoke curling up from under the earth heaped in it. Leaning against the rock wall were several sticks – spears? Fishing rods? And sitting by them were rocks and stones; perhaps they were tools, or perhaps they were simply random rocks and stones. A little way down the hill in a scooped hollow was an untidy midden of bones and skins, broken bottles, empty tin cans, pots, wrappers and dirty clothes and who knows what other garbage and excrement.

Somebody had been here until recently, living off the land and raiding old cellars and shops. No doubt an anthropologist could have said how many people the space supported, but Collard had no idea. He glanced down towards where the *Alfred* was parked, but she was out of sight, which made him feel lonely. Suppressing a desire to turn back immediately, he went up to the cave mouth, listening. Nothing.

"Hello!" he called. The hoarseness of his voice reminded him how long it was since he had spoken to anyone. Was there some response, or an echo? Perhaps his helmet was not helping. Grimacing, he cracked his visor and sniffed the air. It was not as harshly chemical as he had thought before, though

now there was a hint of human waste and dead things.

"Hello!" he called again, squeaking this time. He realised he was nervous. "Anyone there?"

He heard a groan. Collard shone his chest light into the gloomy, dank interior. It smelt of piss, and there was more rubbish inside: clothes and food and skins and a broken table and clutter, including what looked like some old mattresses on the floor, and filthy sleeping bags.

His gaze was drawn to a rag-clothed shape mixed up in its own set of grubby blankets on a low rock shelf. It was as still as if dead, but Collard sensed he was being watched.

"Are you all right?" he said as he stepped into the chill cave. He reached out his free hand. The shape, whatever it was, seemed to shrink back at first, but then sat up. It was swathed head to knee in torn and knotted rags: clothes or camouflage, or both. It looked less live human and more some excavated mummy, until a thin hand pulled some of the rags apart and revealed a pair of large dark eyes that blinked rapidly.

Collard wondered how he looked: a lit bulked-up silver-shining supertech silhouetted against the dazzling outdoors, with a gun.

"Hello," he said, turning off his light and stepping back, hands raised. "Are you all right?"

"Are you a dyk, then?" said a woman's voice from inside the rags. She sounded tired.

"A what?"

"A dyk. D-Y-K, dyk. One of the new smart weapons . . ."

"I don't understand. Are you OK?"

"He said they'd come in human-form one day . . ."

That was news to Collard. "Smart weapons in human form? Who said?"

"He's dead now. Aren't they all?"

"Well, I'm alive, and I'm human," he said. To prove it he unclipped his helmet and laid it on the ground. "There. See?" He rubbed a hand over his itchy scalp.

"He said they were called dyks. Dick Dybbuks, short-for, I think," she said. In her left hand Collard saw a sharp little knife, its wavering tip tracing a tiny figure-of-eight in the air. "He *pricked* people to see if they were real or androids, and one day someone stabbed him right back."

"And . . . ?"

"And killed him, of course."

"Well, don't attempt to use violence on me," said Collard. "Did he ever discover any, ahh, dyks? Man-form weapons? That's new . . ."

"No. No. But I thought I heard an explosion . . ." she said. "A while ago. Was that a tellibomb?"

Collard hesitated. "There've been no intellibombs or exploding androids that I know of," he said, truthfully enough. He coughed; he felt tired and rusty, his voice too raw for talk. He tongued his suit's neck nipple again, the liquid soothing his throat.

"Maybe I was dreaming," she said, hazily. "I dream a lot. Loud bangs, and men with clubs. And food."

Collard was not surprised. Fever, probably, and hunger-induced hallucinations. He glanced round the clammy cave, and outside at the burned woods. Conditions were far worse now than those the first cave-dwellers in Cheddar Gorge had dealt with ten thousand years before, when the air was clean and the forests full of animals and berries.

And now . . . He had heard reports off the orbital monitors of seething low-tech warfare across the world. Fighting for food and water must have come hard when the globalised economy snapped and unraveled, people suddenly tossed out

of their universal cybermarkets into a million local stone ages, without any sophisticated stone age survival skills. Now that he was down here amongst them too, Collard found it surprising anyone at all was able to survive, apart, he supposed, from any unassimilated aboriginals in places like Brazil.

At least there was something he could do for her. One-handed, he fished a nectar bulb out of his first-aid pocket. He popped the top with the multitool blade. "You'll feel better," he said, leaning forward to hand the bulb to her, and trying not to react to her pungent smell.

With her eyes on him and her knife still pointed at his neck, she pulled a rag away from her nose and mouth and sniffed at the syrup suspiciously. "Who *are* you?" she said.

He hesitated, and came up with the first name he could think of. "I'm . . . Wells. Barton Wells." Damn, not very good. "Here," he said hurriedly. "I'll prove it's safe." He took the bulb from her, sipped it, and handed it back.

She sniffed at it again, and squeezed it into her mouth. Her eyes widened as though she had been electrocuted. Collard could only imagine the hit to someone in her condition. "Amazing!" she said wonderingly. She squashed the bulb to get the last drops. "Any more?"

"Better not," he said. "It's strong stuff."

She sat straight up and pulled away the rest of the rags round her head, revealing cropped dark sweat-matted hair framing a pale face. Collard wondered how old she was. Maybe his age, or more likely a twenty-something who'd had a tough time. She was emaciated and dirty, sallow-skinned with lines of exhaustion at her eyes. Almost absentmindedly, she slipped her knife back into her rags, her tongue licking round her cracked lips.

"I can feel it burning . . . You must be from New Zealand!"

"What's in New Zealand?" said Collard, holstering his pistol in turn.

"Sanctuary," she said. Some colour was coming back into her cheeks. "We know they must have escaped all this! They're so . . . isolated. Have I passed the Test?"

According to Collard's information New Zealand had been as fried as everywhere else on Earth, its disaster compounded by colossal war-triggered earthquakes. He hesitated, before deciding to tell the truth. "There's no sanctuary there that I know of."

She did not seem upset at the news; she leant back against the cave wall, oddly relaxed. "Dykman told us stories about that, too. The silk togas and the spring lamb rolls . . . And wine from the sun." Her smile reached to her eyes, which were big, dark and shining. He'd always found women with eyes like that attractive. In fact, she looked vaguely familiar . . .

"Where *did* you come from?" she asked.

He ignored her. It couldn't be, after twenty-odd years . . . but maybe . . . "Jillian?" he said. "Are you Jill Stewart? From Kings of Wessex?"

"No." She looked up and closed her eyes, as if trying to remember something. "I was Kirsty Caylee Mortensen. Back when we needed long names." Her eyes flicked open. "Kings of Wessex? What's that – an estate agent?" She gasped, something like a laugh. "Are you looking for vacant properties? Take your pick! And your shovel!" She started giggling.

"Kings of Wessex was my old school," said Collard, feeling oddly defensive.

"I thought Wessex was fiction," said Kirsty dreamily. "Thomas Hardy and so on. I haven't read him in years. I'm not sure if I ever did. Maybe I saw something on TV. Remember TV?"

"No, you're in Wessex now," said Collard, doggedly. "It was an Anglo-Saxon kingdom, you know, like Mercia, and North-

umbria, and they built hunting palaces in Cheddar . . . ”

“Bugger all things to hunt now,” Kirsty murmured. “I’ve tried.”

Collard looked closely at her face, concerned. She was sleepy. Nectar was supposed to be a pick-me-up for field operatives, not a sedative. Perhaps it was too rich; he hoped he hadn’t poisoned her.

“It was a thousand years ago and more,” he said, talking to hold her attention. “Once King Edmund was nearly killed hunting on the gorge. A stag leapt off the cliffs, the hounds pelting after it, yapping to their deaths. Edmund managed to rein in his horse right at the edge of the precipice. He gave thanks to God by revoking the exile of St Dunstan . . . ”

“And bugger all gods here too. Lots of people died on the cliffs, and everywhere else. You get used to it.”

“I suppose so,” said Collard, uncertainly. Kirsty opened her eyes and smiled at him, an open, friendly smile. Taken aback, Collard hurried on. “Anyway, when they first built my old school, a millennium later, they dug up the ancient palace foundations. That’s about it.” He gestured at the path outside the cave, smiling too. “When I was a kid I used to imagine the ghosts of those old kings galloping over the hills on starry nights, their spears glittering under a hunter’s moon.”

Kirsty glanced dubiously out of the cave into the bright landscape as if she expected some kings to come riding by at that moment. “It’s a long time since anyone told me a story. Not Hardy but Tolkien, then?”

“Sort of; but it really happened . . . And Tolkien was an Anglo-Saxon scholar – ”

“I never much liked Tolkien.”

“I see,” said Collard, reddening. He sat down on a rock. His eyes had by now adjusted to the gloom, and he could see just what a slum the inside of the cave was. It had been a long day, a long week, a long twelve years, and now he was having a surreal conversation he hadn’t bargained for.

“Would you like a cup of tea?” said Kirsty, brightly.

“You’ve got tea?” said Collard, incredulous.

“Joking. Sorry. You’ll think I’m mad. It seemed polite to offer.” To Collard’s surprise, Kirsty suddenly started crying, tears trickling through the dirt on her face. She screwed her eyes up tight and started rocking, like the disturbed psychiatric patients he’d seen on Deimos. “Sometimes I pretend I’m in here for fun and in ten minutes I can go have a Tortelli’s with the girls from the office then metro home to get on the grid or watch a soap, you know?” She sniffed loudly, then dragged a raggedy wrist across her nose, smearing tears and snot. “Or just turn it off. But I know I can’t. It’s all gone. I’m here now and have to deal with it.” She took a deep breath. “Onward, Kirse. So who *are* you, and why are you here?”

Collard felt reluctant to answer. “How do you manage to survive?” he asked instead.

“I’ve got water.” Near her was a jug; she picked it up, looked in it, swirled it around, and grimaced. “And I can get food.”

Maybe it was the kid he’d killed who had been helping her, and vice versa; the two a team, bringing water, fish, tins. Scavenging. Damn. Why hadn’t she mentioned a helper? Perhaps she didn’t trust him and was being cunning, playing her cards close. There might be others, or a gang. They could be listening now, getting closer. Jump him and slit his throat. He had been careless, complacent. The world had changed. This was not home any more.

He picked up his helmet and stood, feeling suddenly cold. “We’d better get you to my ship. Give you a checkup.”

“Your ship?” said Kirsty as he took her hand. She did not resist as he helped her to her feet, and she held onto the arm

of his easuit as he led her out of the cave into the crashing sunlight. She shielded her eyes with a hand and looked around. The landscape seemed too bright, and Collard screwed up his eyes. He felt an uncomfortable tickling in his back; was she expecting someone? Maybe an arrow would plunge between his shoulder blades. He turned round, but there was no one there. He felt sweat prickle his face.

“Did you sail over from Wales, then?” she asked, interrupting his thoughts.

“No,” he said.

Kirsty stepped carefully, looking down at where her feet were going. “I don’t normally go out in the day since the ozone layer was whacked.” Blinking in the light, she appeared only now to take note of what Collard was wearing. Her hand explored his arm and chest, silver reflecting brightly in the sun. “Weird material.” She touched a small badge on his shoulder, black, with stars and an acronym. “NATUSC?” she said. “That’s Natu – ”

“Space Command,” said Collard.

“Is this for real?”

Collard nodded. “Though I’m . . . I’m retired.”

Kirsty shook her head, slowly. “But NATUSC was destroyed. Utterly.”

“No. Did this, ahh, dykman tell you that, too?”

“Everyone knew it. *After the hammering of Titan by Collard the Barbarian the Chinasian and Natu Space forces fought each other to a standstill, and then both were utterly crushed by the arsenals of AI.*”

“Not yet,” said Collard, wearily. “Neither Natu nor the Chinase. Despite . . . despite Collard. Anyway, Collard didn’t start the war, the AIs did.” Better get off the subject of himself. “How can you know anything about anything, living in a cave? Looking at shadows on the wall?” He wiped an arm across his sweaty brow. He breathed deep, calming himself. “Believe me, I know. I’ve seen reports. Chinasian and Natu together, fighting the joint enemy. They, we, have kept the bombs bottled up on Earth. So far. They’re not in space yet.”

“You’re telling the truth . . . ?”

“Yes. But that day will soon come.” Collard squinted at the dirty, hazed sky. The air was getting hotter by the minute as the blazing sun rose higher. Kirsty was silent by his side, presumably slotting the new information into her world view.

“Look, sorry,” said Collard. “But come on. I must get back to the ship. I’m not acclimatised like you.”

She looked into his pale face, and then allowed him to guide her down the slope, away from the cave.

“If Natters and the Chinkees are still in control in space,” she said hesitantly, thinking things out, “then how come we haven’t been rescued?”

“We?”

“Us on Earth. We thought up there was empty, everybody dead. But it isn’t.”

“Quarantine,” he said.

“Space is quarantined?”

He smiled. “No, the Earth. Isolated, no traffic allowed. It’s a standoff, I guess.”

“We were abandoned. Simple as that.”

“There isn’t that much living-space off-Earth.”

“Especially after Titan. So how come you’re here?”

Collard turned his face away, no good answer to hand. Besides, war or no war, it would have been an impossible population move. And pointless; Earth still had a thousand times more usable land and air and water than anywhere else in the system. Or maybe a million. If it wasn’t for the smartbombs,

Earth would be a green and blue and white planet still capable of supporting twelve billion people.

If, if, if.

No use crying about that now. With relief, Collard saw the nose of the *Alfred* emerge from behind the rim of the combe. It was good to see the chunky lines of her powerpods and weapons again. He did not mention it to Kirsty until a few more steps revealed the whole ship standing small but proud and marble-black on the detritus of the gorge floor. She looked as though she had come from a million years away.

"There she is," said Collard. He looked to see Kirsty's reaction, and was gratified. She stared down at the ship, her eyes glistening, even nakedly greedy.

"Wow," she said softly. "I believe you. So manned ships still fly." She swallowed. "What's it called?"

"I call her *Alfred the Great*."

"She's called Alfred?" said Kirsty, giggling. "Come on. I never heard NATUSC was whimsical about their ships. What's her official name?"

"King Alfred was a King of Wessex," he said. "It's my name for her."

"Jeez, another king?"

"Alfred. The greatest. See, by 878 AD the seven English kingdoms were overrun by marauding Danes . . ." He could recite the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entry as though it was in front of him. "*This year about mid-winter, after twelfth-night, the Danish army stole out of Chippenham, and rode over the land of the West-Saxons; where they settled, and drove many of the people over sea; and of the rest the greatest part they rode down, and subdued to their will; – all but Alfred the King. He, with a little band, uneasily sought the woods and fastnesses of the moors . . .* He was living hand-to-mouth with his men and they were almost wiped out. If they had been, we wouldn't be speaking English now –"

"Chal! We'd have learned it from the Americans like everyone else."

Collard smiled. It was good to be talking with a real person after so long, someone who could react. By design *Alfred* had extremely constrained AI and you could talk to her as you might a trained dog, but that was hardly the same. "Anyway, the king rallied the men of Somerset and Wiltshire, and defeated the Danes." He pointed out across the water, to a low rising island ridge dotted with ruins a few kilometres away. "They signed the treaty that year at Wedmore. Inside a century Alfred's grandson was the first King of a united England."

And within a thousand years, the British Empire spread across a quarter of the globe, and a hundred years after that the United States of America had hegemony, and a hundred years after that Natu did – and in some way it all turned on what Alfred managed to do right here.

And yet, so what. In another century from now, or maybe even ten years, all meaning of England and the USA and Natu would be burned away, leaving a dead world patrolled by sentient missiles. He shivered, despite the heat.

"So now I get why you're here," said Kirsty, smiling as if she had just solved a problem. "With this *Alfred*."

Collard shook his head, ruefully. "I doubt it. It's personal."

"I'm not stupid!" said Kirsty whispering loudly, as though half-worried there were hidden spies nearby. "You're the resistance, aren't you! To the smartbombs!"

"No . . ."

"You don't fool me. Humanity fights back! So what's your strength? More than a little band of men in the woods!"

Collard smiled sadly. "No. I'm afraid it's not that."

"Reconnaissance, then?"

"No."

"Advance planning . . . strategy, tactics . . . for some future operation . . ."

"No. That's impossible." He wished she would not go on about it. He felt hot and uncomfortable, and missed the cool, controllable air of the *Alfred*. How did people ever live like this, out on the surface, subject to the whims of the climate?

"Why?" said Kirsty.

"I don't think you realise the magnitude of the task."

"Then why are you here!" said Kirsty, angrily. "What the hell was that talk about fighting the bloody Danes?"

Collard looked into her eyes. "Don't you want ever to get back to where you're from, Kirsty? Before . . . well, before the end?"

"OK, OK." She threw up her arms. "If you won't say, you won't!" She stumbled; the track here was steeper and narrower. They would have to go single file from now on.

"Come on," he said. "Not far now."

"I'm tired," said Kirsty, and she sat down on a flat rock.

After a moment's thought, he sat down beside her, placing his helmet on his knees. They rested, both breathing heavily. Collard gazed at the horizon, blinking away sweat and tasting the bitter, tired breeze. Nothing much left of the lungs of the world, he supposed, and it brought no cooling, only more heat, as though a furnace in the bowels of the hills was brewing up more firestorms.

Many a man sat beset by sorrow.

Misery his future, he often wished

That the kingdom would fall.

That passed over, so may this.

So said the minstrel Deor to console himself in his lamentations. But even old Deor would have given up by now.

"Where are you from?" he asked, when the silence between them had grown too deep.

"Carlisle," said Kirsty, under her breath.

Collard waited, but she stayed quiet, staring ahead. Perhaps he would have been better off not giving her any nectar; allied to her malnutrition and the shock of meeting a complete stranger, it seemed to have caused mood swings. And the heat wasn't making him any more relaxed either. He pulled out a coolcloth from his medikit and wiped his face.

"Did you try getting back?" he asked, feeling only slightly refreshed.

She paused before answering. "I was heading home, when I got stuck here," she said. "Seemed no point going on. Refugees were going all ways at once, fighting like dogs." She shook her head. "I know it's all gone." She lifted an arm with some difficulty, and waved it vaguely across the ruined landscape. "But if I stay here I can kid myself the North avoided the cataclysm, see?"

"Life's still going on in a parallel world . . ."

Kirsty's eyes shone. "Exactly! My family and friends are . . ." Her voice trailed off, then rallied. "Living in another country! I got lost, but they're OK." Her expression turned harder. "I don't want to see Carlisle now. I saw my dad in his coffin and for years I could only remember him that way. But at least he missed all this."

Bad things are only bad if you see them . . . Well, it's a philosophy, thought Collard. Happy pig or unhappy Socrates. Or maybe Many Worlds. Perhaps in some alternative Cheddar they were even now selling scrumpy and telling the grockles about stalactites and stalagmites.

"I did want to come back," he said, picking up a handful of stones. "I had a great childhood here. Strawberry-picking; school. Cider. Pubs. Pioneers. Friends. It was perfect."

"Because it's wrapped up in a pretty bundle, and you can look at it from all sides," said Kirsty decisively. Perhaps she had been sitting in her cave thinking about this, for years. "While you were embedded in it, the future was unknown. But now you know you survived it, it looks like a golden age."

"I wanted to come back once last time. See my old stamping grounds . . ."

Kirsty looked at him, eyes narrowed. "Did you think it would be like before?"

"No! Of course not –"

"Of course? Your school, the scouts, dead kings – it's all ancient history you talk about. What about the last twenty or thirty years! You must have done other things since you were a kid." She seemed to be studying his face for signs of adult experiences.

"I've made some big mistakes," Collard grimaced. "And I've had enough of being out front. Exposed."

"What do you mean?"

What *did* he mean? He tossed a stone down the hill, watched it bounce away, gathering speed as the narrow path steepened. The sense of being out of control, events coming too fast, everything speeding up, no chance to sit back, go back and do it right the next time because there is no next time. On on on, an accelerating, plunging dive. And when you do make a mistake, the consequences are utterly catastrophic.

"Time," he said. "The future comes too fast. I want a rest. Let someone else be in front." He scooped up another handful of small stones and dropped them one by one at his feet. How long had those stones sat here on the surface of the Earth? Ten years? Ten thousand? Getting on with being inanimate rocks while the animate world went mad.

Kirsty was thoughtful. "There's no way to stand back and . . . build a buffer against it. We all arrive in the future at the same time . . . Barton. No way to avoid that."

Collard grunted. Had she seen through his name?

"There's always death," he said.

"Death . . . ?"

"If everything won't slow down . . ."

Kirsty stared at him, "What do you mean?"

It was getting to be a refrain of hers. Collard threw his remaining stones down the steep path, picked up his helmet and stood up. "I was planning to climb up the Gorge and jump off the Pinnacles," he said, taking Kirsty's arm. He pulled her to her feet and almost pushed her into continuing the descent.

"What the hell for?"

"It's a great view. I loved it as a kid."

"You think you can take your memories with you?" She sounded contemptuous, glancing at him over her shoulder. "You came all this way in a fancy spaceship to kill yourself? When people who didn't want to die have died in their millions? How dare you?" Kirsty rubbed her hands on her rags nervously, as if trying to clean them. Some hope.

They descended in silence, feet crunching in the dead earth.

"Listen," she said eventually. "You said that was your plan. So what are you going to do now?"

"I don't know. I really don't know," he said.

"Are you taking the piss?"

In some ways she still reminded Collard of Jillian, his first unrequited love. Her scornful tone, for one. He felt awkward. Kirsty had obviously clung to life in tough conditions, her only consolation daft fantasies of a saviour taking her to New Zealand where everyone would be clothed in honey. And what

do you know? The miracle happened; he had sailed in from the stars on a black charger, and he could indeed take her to New Zealand, or anywhere. But all he had done was tell her she was wasting her time.

Well, sod it, she almost certainly was.

"The Earth is finished," he said, bitterly. "We're finished. What's the point carrying on? The smartbombs will get us in the end. They'll get off Earth. Their brain breeder nests and component factories are already going underwater, in the mountains. They're proliferating, evolving: nano, mammoth, medium, specialised, multiple, broad. You said there were man-shapes . . . who knows; if that's true, I should report it. But then why not cat-shapes, fern-shapes? Locusts? Rocks? Bacteria? Makes more sense. They'll be filling every niche and soon they'll find a route into space. And then humanity will be wiped out everywhere."

"How did we get here?" she said, tears in her eyes.

"Here?" echoed Collard. They were down by Lion Rock, almost at the end of the main descent. He gazed along the bottom of the Gorge at the *Alfred*. It would be good to get back on board, turn up the air conditioning, plug in the links and fly away somewhere and leave all this behind. Take Jillian with him.

Sorry. Kirsty.

"The Cataclysm. The smartbombs. The whole shit," she was saying.

"How?" He turned his attention back to her. "How? I'll tell you how!" He was shouting. "By going AI instead of Symbi; by thinking battlespace management was too much for human control; by taking humans out of weapons platforms and turning critical ops over to the AI supergrids; by giving weapons the ability to evolve their own lifecycle modes from raw material extraction to deployment using nanotech . . ."

"OK, I didn't mean –"

"By allowing the monster bastard of von Neuman machines and WMD to be born, midwifed by AI, and thinking we could retire to watch it on TV while the machines fought our robot wars cleanly for us. Well, they were never going to, were they? We knew it a thousand years ago –"

*Greedy weapons seeking slaughter
Crushed mankind – a dazzling doom!
A storm-surge on these stony slopes*

Well we sowed the wind all right. Frankenstein's monster, Prometheus – We can't turn it off! We might as well just piss off out of the way!"

Kirsty nodded. "Okay, okay. But if we do, all that stuff will go too."

Collard was breathing hard, almost panting, like a dog. He wiped his face again. "What stuff?"

"Prometheus. Frankenstein. All those stories. Your kings and their swords. All culture and art and myths and history and science and songs and books and tavidis and everything everyone has ever done and thought!"

"Well for God's sake look around you! Feel the heat! It's gone already. By the time the bombs have finished sterilising the Earth, all the effort we made over thousands of years to build civilisation will be rubble . . . pointless."

"Bollocks," said Kirsty, tapping her forehead. "It's not stone buildings, it's in here. World three. Off the planet, in data storage as well, even books, papers . . ."

Collard shook his head, looking at the detritus of the ruined tourist shops. They were down now, at ground level and on the old roadway, picking their way over the rubble.

"For how long? In the long run, it's all over."

"In the long run we're all dead, I know. We live with death here, every day."

"Not just that," said Collard. "They'll scrape the Earth and eradicate everything. They'll churn it all up, plough it in and salt it and nothing will grow again, except new weapons, and when they've defeated us they'll fight each other, for want of anything else to do. It's the military imperative. Three billion years of evolution ends in you and me."

How long could they carry on? He did not know. Perhaps, hundreds of years into the future, an Earth as bare as the Moon would still be subject to the whine and crump of evolving weapons battling it out. Maybe they would fight on in the solar system, and then interstellar space. Maybe in millions of years mankind's weapons will be fighting on the shores of distant galaxies, harvesting great swathes of resources to continue the war. What was it Aldous Huxley had said? Man is alone among the animals in that he kills for a principle, for an idea, whereas animals live by instinct alone and survive, unworried about ancient slights. And now we have impressed our psychological flaws of memory and planning on our machines along with life's natural yen for expansion, and they have gone beyond us, failing to take restraint and sense with them.

He looked at the sky, and threw an arm up.

"And in a billion years," he said, "maybe an alien starfaring race will come through this system looking for the source of the virulent menace and there will be nothing to show that there was ever life on Earth except – except what? Some pitted old structures on a dead Moon. That will be our legacy."

He stopped alongside a cracked boulder and slapped it hard. The sound echoed around them, bouncing from the cliffs. He looked up. To his surprise, Kirsty laughed, harshly.

"You're the most miserable pessimist I've heard in the last four years! And there've been plenty."

He couldn't help it; he grinned as he took the opportunity for another rest and a chance to survey the best route ahead. Beyond the ship, the seawater was flat, hazy and shining. Unnatural. He would not be immersed in this heat trap much longer, and could feel his dry mouth start to salivate at the thought of a cool lemonade from the ship.

"Why not look on the bright side," said Kirsty. "Perhaps the smartbombs are the next stage of our evolution."

Collard glanced at her. There was a sheen on her face. Was she burning with fever? There was a twinkle in her eye, too.

"How?" he said.

"The universe starts with nothing; maybe pure information. The Big Bang comes – pure energy. That cools to become particles and stars. Stars explode to produce heavy elements, matter. Matter produces life. Life produces thought, thought creates information, which requires machines to handle properly. Eventually, all energy and matter is converted to information. And then it starts over again."

Despite himself, he smiled. "Hmmm. And this cosmology is the bright side?"

Kirsty smiled, thinly. "You could call it progress, of sorts. Things moving on . . . But for me, I go with life. Where there's life . . . you know."

"Where there's life, you can always kill yourself later." He stretched, easing his aching back and leg muscles. He was so unfit for surface operations it would have meant a reprimand, if he had not been in utter disgrace already. So what now for the future?

"Come on," he said. "Only a short way to the ship. Perhaps

I can show you New Zealand after all. Why not?"

And again there was that unguarded gleam in her eyes. Well, she would be excited, wouldn't she? The comfort, the power, the unthinking control over nature for a change, instead of being subject to its whims. Why not make use of it?

"I'll go first," he said, turning his back on her. "Some of these rocks and boulders down at the bottom are shaky. We don't want you to break your leg."

You only get one life. Perhaps she was right, he should not just give up because of some self-indulgent guilt trip. Why not give it a go, and fight back? What if Alfred the Great had sat around in the marshes of Somerset, moaning that the Danes were too powerful, how could he fight them with a few beggared guerillas and peasant farmers? But he did not. He came out of the shadow of the woods and fought, took back huge chunks of the land, built a navy, founded a nation.

Maybe it is not hopeless. There must be some chink in the smartbombs' armour, a way into their systems. A virus someone could build, a weapon that would fry them. Sure, he would not be the one to discover it. Probably some researcher or soldier or teenhack out in orbit. But he could help. They could pull together. A band of men and women hiding in the marshes, fighting the machines.

"The Bishop of Bath and Wells!" Kirsty said suddenly, behind him. "That's where I heard that name before. You're not Barton Wells, you're Collard!"

Collard turned and stared at her. "Why do you say that?"

She stepped closer to him, pale and wide-eyed. "It's the name on your backpack."

Damn. He had removed it from his front but not there. Well, so what? "Backpacks are swappable," he said.

"You *are* Peter Collard?" she said, touching his chest lightly, as if wondering if he was real. "Collard the Barbarian, Hammer of Titan?"

"Yes," said Collard, warily. "I didn't want to alarm anyone." He was not sure what else to say, so he turned and carried on walking towards the *Alfred*. Kirsty kept pace. Collard made a mental note to steer her away from where he had killed the young kid, somewhere to the front and left of them, under the south side wall. Best not introduce complications, or confirmation. Barbarian . . .

"Why the Barbarian?" he said, causally moving to her right and trying to keep Kirsty looking his way. "Why not Collard the Killer? Collard the Cataclysm Catalyst?"

"Barbarian seemed to sum it up well enough, I guess." She looked him over as if for the first time, as if inspecting his bland face for signs of psychopathy. "What happened, after Titan? We lost the news. It was rumoured Collard was dead. Or in jail. Or had taken command of a pirate red legion of planet-killers and was threatening vengeance on anyone who stood in his way."

Collard grimaced. He would have preferred not to deal with all this right now. "None of that. When I realised my . . . mistake, my war crime . . . I could have given myself up. To Natu. Or even the Chinase." He looked up at the bright sky, squinting as if the answer lay in the shimmering boiled air. "Expiated my guilt. Sought . . . I don't know. But I didn't look for justice or all that. I just deserted." He paused, then recited:

*"How cruel a companion sorrow is
To one now friendless in the world:
The road of exile is his.
No shower of gold, no earthly joy
Only the cold cave of a lone heart."*



"What was that?"

"It's from *The Wanderer*. Anyway. I disappeared and planned to do what I had to do in my own way at my own time."

He looked around. It was somewhere near here, he thought, that the kid had attacked him. He glanced to the left, trying to recall exactly where, and saw the body, lying as he had left it, about twenty metres off.

"I used you as a bogeyman," Kirsty was saying. "For my son. Behave, or Collard the . . . Well, Collard will come and kill you. Chop off your hands, blow up your belly, suck out your lungs, freeze your brain . . . the usual stuff you scare children with. But it is hard to make that work in times like these."

Collard was looking down, checking his footholds. He felt a chill. Her son? "You have a son? Where is he?"

She hesitated, then shook her head. "He's dead."

Collard relaxed, and only just avoided saying *Thank God*. Instead he said, "I'm sorry."

"Yeah. Me too."

"It happened here, mum," a new voice behind them said. "Ludo's just there."

Collard whirled.

He'd been right. Followed. Caught a glimpse: a solid girl, a throwing arm. A full rock flat-slammed into his temple. Dazed, he let his helmet fall and he dropped to his knees. Twice in a day! Another rock hit him sharp in the jaw and he sat back. He had a brief sight of brown legs and arms all over him, and heard Kirsty shout "Mairal!" and suddenly he was out and then it was a few seconds later and he was lying on the ground, and Kirsty was yelling at a thirteen-year-old savage who had his pistol in her hand, pointing it at him.



"Put his gun down, Maira! Put it away!" shouted Kirsty.

"No! Mum! He killed Ludo! I saw it!" said the girl. She was a little like the boy: feral, brown and dirty, wearing some ancient clothes. Collard shook his head, trying to clear the muzziness.

"But he's got a ship! We can fight! We can escape!"

"Where!" cried the girl. "We live here!"

Kirsty laughed, sourly. "Maira! This isn't our home. Home was Carlisle or London, home was years ago, home is gone, we have no home. Remember? We were stuck, now we can go! Don't you see?"

"To New Zealand? The Moon?" Maira almost spat. "London? I dunno them, they're not real." She pointed a stubby finger at the gorge wall. "I know here. We can live here!"

"Maira, but we're dying!"

Collard groaned and tried to sit up. He could feel blood in

his eyes and trickling behind his left ear, mingling with the sweat. He felt shivery and overheated at the same time.

"We live! We're fine!" Maira faced Collard head on. "Until you came, you bastard! Who asked you?"

"He's going to fight the bombs!"

Collard swallowed. "This is *my* home too, Maira," he said carefully, his cheek swollen. "I was born right here, forty-odd years ago."

Maira sneered. "Yeah? Good. You can die right here too!" and as Kirsty shouted "No!" the wild wolf cub Maira aimed the gun straight at Collard's flushed, blotchy face and pulled the trigger.

Nothing happened.

Maira scampered back as she looked down to see if there was a safety catch she'd missed.

"It's symbiotic," said Collard, wearily. "Coded to me. Like the ship itself. Only I can use it."

"Thank God," said Kirsty with relief, as Collard struggled to his knees.

"Traitor!" shouted Maira and ran at Collard, knocking him on his back. She smashed the butt of the pistol into his head, and again, and again, a hard hammering. "Get her off! Get her off!" Collard shouted, and Kirsty was shouting too, "Maira, stop! Stop!" and brandishing her own knife. Collard felt weak, he had to do something. He fumbled for his multitool and popped the largest blade. He was sinking into a tunnel of whirring flies, no time. He lashed out, hard. Missed. Again. He felt the blade cut deep. He wrenched it out. Hands covered in her blood, slippery. But Maira dropped her useless gun and made a grab for his blade. Collard dropped it, stretched for the pistol, his fingers clutching at soil, dirt, ash, rock. He felt a shock as Maira jabbed him in the chest. The suit held. She pulled back, aimed a stab at his neck, hit the neck ring, tried again, panting, sweaty. His free hand found the gun, fumbled for the grip, got it. Maira got one good jab at his neck, pushing deep. The pain was hot but secondary, he had to act, blood gushing. He twisted the gun and fired, got Maira in the chest. She grunted and tried to knife him again but her strength was ebbing fast. Her eyes blazed with a last flare of animal hate, and she collapsed on top of him, her rattly last breath flecked with blood foam. She seemed to be looking at something else over the sea as her eyes closed, and she died, coughing.

Maira had probably caused him some serious damage. Collard the Barbarian, almost undone by a thirteen-year-old girl. He heaved her hefty bloody body off before turning warily to Kirsty. His breath came in sharp jolts, a taste of blood in his mouth, a bubbling sensation at his neck. He felt exhausted, utterly drained by the swamp heat and the exertion.

Kirsty stared. "For someone who came here to kill himself," she said, "you have a great sense of self-preservation."

Through his pain, Collard thought: that's an odd thing to say.

"We better get to the ship," said Kirsty. "We mustn't stay out in the open. The noise. They'll notice."

"Who'll?" He had difficulty speaking.

She waved vaguely at the air. "Patrols. And anyway," she said, "got to get you medical attention. Get to your ship . . . Got to get away!"

Collard looked down at silent Maira and then beyond, to the corpse of the boy they had called Ludo. He blinked away sweat. "You don't seem . . . too bothered."

"There's no time for this!" shrieked Jillian.

She'd looked so beautiful on the top of Glastonbury Tor on that frosty day, her hair haloed in sunset gold above the misty wisps, the moon rising in her eyes. Bright Venus diamond bright. They'd shared warm sharp slugs from a bottle of Stone's Ginger Wine. The only thing missing was a choir, singing. God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen.

No, Kirsty.

He shook his head to clear the fog. She was saying they should get to the ship, that he was losing blood. She was trying to lead him there. She was holding one hand against his wounds. Her mouth was moving, her eyes shining like a Morning Star and an Evening Star. She led him forward, step by step.

Must concentrate. This was important. Why wasn't Kirsty worried about the death of her children? Seemed kind of unnatural. Inhuman. Unfeeling.

"But your kids . . ." he said. Inhuman, had he thought that?

"They're not really my kids," said Kirsty, as if from a distance.

"Truth is, I was scared of them. Didn't believe in the old days. Or me and my stories."

"They called you mum."

"We sort of adopted each other. Allies. Our territory. Kind of a tribe, we were. And others. They're gone now, or scattered. Dykman, the Fisherwoman. Ballsup. People are always dying, or going mad. Kids, adults. Happens all the time. You get used to it." She shook her head. "Maira should have come with us. She could have adapted to . . . whatever. If she'd tried. But . . ."

"But you," said Collard, energy slipping from him. Was it normal for her to be so casual? "You believe . . . You can adapt . . . You want to get out."

"Yes. And you? Still a deathwish? Or – fight. Fight the smart-bombs?"

That was it, he thought. Of course. That's what I had resolved to do. Fight the smartbombs. Those cunning weapons, always looking for sneaky niches to attack us from. Pitiless. Devil spawn of evil Man. "Yes," he said, thickly. "Hunt them down. Do my bit. For Alfred the Great!" And who knows what pace of change they'd set themselves, what goals. Who knows what they'd look like now, how they'd work. Disguising themselves as real people, then blooie! Up goes all.

He noticed a large shadow on the ground, artificial, curved. He looked up. The *Alfred* was just a few metres off, looming above him. Big, powerful. A sanctuary. A way into space. A funnel to the sky. He had to think but his head felt sluggish.

"How do you open the hatch? How do you get in?" said Kirsty, sounding as though she was a long way back, back inside her cave. There was a roaring in his ears. He had the symbiotic key, of course, and she did not. And she wanted it, to get away.

The bastards! How could he have been so blind? And she had banged on about his strength, what he was doing, his ship name . . . Pumping him for info all the time. He suddenly pulled away from her, stumbled a few steps backwards.

"What are you doing?" she said. "You need surgery . . . You need your ship."

He backed off, raised his pistol. Its tip wavered a little, drawing, he noticed, a small figure of eight in the air. "I get it now," he said, hoarsely. He was getting weaker, had to act. "You're not human! You're the bitch android smart-bomb vanguard!"

"Don't be stupid!" said Kirsty, but he could see she was worried. He had found her out!

"Get your machine men replicating in space? Take over the universe? Well, I'm here to stop you!"

"Collard . . . Peter . . ." said Kirsty, taking a step forward. "Look, you're delirious. Let me get you on board . . . You're sick."

"That's what you want me to think!"

"If I was a gynoid, I could overpower you. But I can't . . ."

He shook his head. "You need me alive. For the controls and the symbolicals." He fired, hit her in the leg. She screamed.

"You were good, but you don't fool me!" he shouted, and aimed again.

"Peter," she yelled, cringing, trying to get out of the way, crying.

He fired again, missed. "Stand still, dammit!" he shouted.

Kirsty took a chance by rushing at him, her knife aimed at his gun hand. But she was hurt badly and as she closed in she was easier to hit and he fired again, blasting a hole in her side and knocking her down in a spattercloud of dust.

"For King Alfred!" he yelled, exultant, as she lay at his feet, "and St George!"

Kirsty turned over and looked up at him, pain in her eyes. "I'm not a weapon, you idiot," she whispered.

Collard shot her in the head, screaming. "Take that you robot!"

Kirsty's shattered body lay broken and bloody in the dirt. Collard limped forward and looked down on it, feeling pumped up and relieved. Very realistic. Clever. Almost human. Nearly got him. Good blood.

He knelt down, weary. Those shots, and explosions. And the ship. Bound to attract some of her friends. Allies. He should get going. And his own blood. He was losing it.

But he was very tired. He needed to rest here, here on the good Earth, before he could face opening the ship and clambering up the hatch and getting into his couch and letting *Alfred* take him away somewhere cool and black and speckled with stars where he could dream for a month and be made whole again.

And he had real news to tell, of the new walking smartbombs, something useful for his eternally vigilant colleagues to take on board in their high stations. He was sure no report had got out before about these human-form weapons. So much for sigint analysis and computer monitoring. See? Nothing beats a human in the loop, boots on the ground.

He had done well. Even if he did nothing else, he had redeemed himself for Titan. Perhaps they would sing about him in the drinking halls in the sky, as the rime-crust *Seafarer* had contemplated on his lonely ocean journey through icy winds and snow:

*The best fame of all is the praise
Given a man on his death.
It must be earned in life
By work against the evil of monsters
And deeds against the Devil himself.
Then he shall be forever exalted
And live in glory with the brightest of angels.*

Hail Earendel!

This was better than committing suicide, a sin as well. That's a point – do smartbombs know sin? Are they descendants of man, or creatures of the Devil? Something to chat about in the ready room.

He noticed that the shadows seemed to have moved. He wondered if he had drifted off to sleep. Better not do that. Maybe his vision was wrong. He shook his head.

Something had changed. He tried to analyse it.

Among the rocks and boulders and heaps of stone there were several new objects. Some of them shiny gold, some of them matt black and some red and blue, and most he could see were lifted up on legs, like crabs or cockroaches. They all seemed to have cam eyes, sensors. Plato units for self-repair, like the *Alfred*. Shells of armour chitin and plasteel. Not like the *Alfred*. They were watching. What?

A movement near his hand attracted his attention. A little silver centipede the size of his glove was dragging his gun away, out of reach. He made an effort to grab it but it was already too far from him, and he was weak.

"Hey," he said. "What's going on?"

When the bigger crabs saw he was disarmed, two of them started to scuttle in.

"Shit!" He called launch-go: "Go, dart, three!" but his helmet was too far away, lying on the ground, useless; he was disconnected from his defence dart system.

The crabs reached out and using manipulative pincers they carefully took hold of his arms and legs and head, even though he was struggling, flapping feebly at them. The things seemed to be working cooperatively as part of some networked link-mind, and they took great care not to damage his hands or his

eyes. Carefully, they cut away his evasuit and cooling johns and held him naked on the ground. The air was warm, he felt like a newborn baby. Were they surgeons, come to fix him? But he knew they were more than that, even as they gave him some calming anaesthetic and probed his symbilical link points.

He stared up at the yellow dome of the sky. Up there, the remnants of free humanity were vigilant on their ancient star wars platforms, trying to ensure no intelligent weapons got off Earth. But if they got a human ship the smartbombs could do it, build a bridge to the solar system and beyond.

What Kirsty had been trying to do. Or maybe not, after all.

He groaned and turned his head, looked over to where the Pinnacles used to be. He should have gone up there on the clifftop as soon as he landed, and jumped off, as he had planned for so many long years. 120 metres, straight down. To atone for his crimes on Titan. And he would have done, if it hadn't been for Kirsty. And those kids.

As if anyone would know how he had died. Maybe he should have flown instead into the heart of the sun, left not even a single atom as memorial to himself.

Could have, should have, but didn't.

He was lifted gently and carried towards the *Alfred the Great*, like a great warrior king on his shield, maybe Beowulf himself. It would be good to be buried in a ship, with gold, wine, jewels and weapons piled around and a fiery flame to lift him once more into the sky, Jillian leading the mourners with an oil lamp, or maybe coming along with him, sacrificed to join him on a trip to the Dog Star. He was barely aware as his palms and retinal patterns and DNA signature were placed against the door sensors and cross-calibrated with his code key as required, and the *Alfred's* hatch opened and the ramp came out.

As the two doctor crabs lifted him into the ship Collard caught a glimpse of a pair of small broken non-dyk human bodies lying bloody in the dust a few metres off.

"Sorry, Jillian," he said. "I did it for you. And all of us." He wondered what smartbombs fought for. Fundamentalist mechanics? Kernel ex programa? And did they have machine poetry, and jokes? 1001101000, ha ha, heard it.

After him, following up the black ramp, walked a small army of determined intelligent machines, of all shapes and sizes, down to just visible, and beyond for all he knew. Nanobot carriers and military von Neumann machines, bionukes and chemikazes, planners and coordinators, medics and mechanics. Maybe one was a machine poet, thinking about exile, and wandering, and ruin. Deor, lamenting.

*Thirty years Theodric held tight
To the Maring's land
It was known by all, and yet
That passed over, and so may this.*

Titan seemed a long time ago. It had happened to a different man, who had gone now. The two docbots wound this one up in wire, like spiders with a fly, and gagged him so he would only be able to buzz, not move or set off any alarms or self-destruct systems.

That passed over, and so may this.

The hatch of the *Alfred* closed, and Collard waited for the lifting whine.

Nicholas has had several stories published in *Interzone*, including his first, 'The Travel Agent' (12130), and a story that is a very loose companion piece to this one, 'Sandtrap' (12187). Some Sundays he can be found walking round the top of Cheddar Gorge, but he has not been to either Titan or the Kings of Wessex, though both places exist.



Hayao Miyazaki: personal soulbuilding

ANDREW DSHOND



ANIME-TEDE

ANIME AND MANGA

Introducing Japanese animation to *Interzone* feels uncomfortably like defending Tolkien on *Newsnight*'s Late Review when Germaine Greer's on the warpath. It's perilous territory. There's the 'media-v-literature' divide. There are the tangles of anime commentary, fan canon and apocryphal advertising, the apologias, fashions and brandings ('Manga movies! The punk rock of the 90s!'). And past that, a Far Eastern pop-form that, on conservative reckonings, is a half-century old, comprising more than eighteen years' continuous 2D viewing according to Clements and McCarthy's peerless *Anime Encyclopedia*... and it's all but a facet of Japan's headspinning multimedia, along with the doorstep comics, dynastic videogames and *Matrix* tie-ins.

A similarity between anime and SF is that both are simultaneously glorified and travestied in global mundane media. *Akira* is as much a fan-baiting touchstone by marketing fiat for anime as *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* are for SF. In Britain, and to some degree America, Japanese animation was synthetically recreated for local markets as a transgressive sub-medium for Generation X. Foreign cartoons with violence! And sex! And swearing! And schoolgirl Lolitas! With big eyes! And big robots! When some nameless unfortunate is bloodily shot to bits on the streets of Neo-Tokyo in *Akira*, it's analogous to one's first finding of slash fan-fiction, a 'familiar' U-rated cartoon form suddenly drenched with forbidden excess.

Anime was not just cartoons, but a secret history revealed to non-japanese

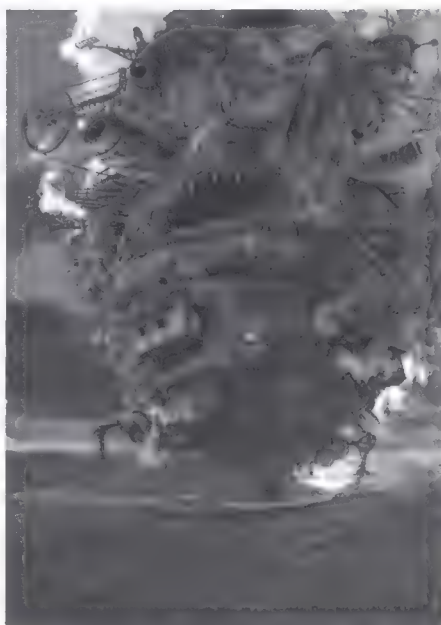
speakers through specialist books, magazines and what we'd heard of *Battle of the Planets*. For readers of other generations, *Battle of the Planets* was a TV space-adventure cartoon that dominated playground chatter around 1980. To a 10-year-old it seemed vital and epic, yet with the baffling sense that you were missing most of the story – probably because you were, the whole thing rescripted and edited into incoherence by US distributors from an early TV anime (*Gatchaman*). As a sign of how much it changed, *Gatchaman* wasn't even set in space. (*Akira*, a far better anime, has a similar befuddling effect on newbies; the plot is a highlights remix of the first half of a 2100-page comic serial.) The unveiling of hidden texts from a distant culture had narrative satisfactions even when the cartoon sucked.

Yet the great thing about Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, released to (not enough) British cinemas last year, quite apart from the fact that it was a great fantasy film – though not its director's best – is that its appeal had nothing to do with fannish decoding. Critics raved over the exotic old-Japan 'bathhouse of the spirits' setting, but the film was transparently accessible to kids, non-initiates, and anyone else lured in the moaning foot-tunnel in the midst of essentially fairy-tale woods. It's hard to classify a film as a comic-shop cult when you can take a 7-year-old to it. The film's main 'transgression' is a nightmare archetype; the child runs frantically back to the enchanted restaurant to find Mom and Dad replaced by pigs in their clothes. While edgier than classic Disney's balletic separation terrors, it's clearly continuous with the dark bits of *Snow White* or *Bambi*, and that itself knocks a hole in anime's 'manga' ghetto.

Miyazaki followed up *Spirited Away* this year with *Howl's Moving Castle*, based on the 1986 Diana Wynne Jones book from midway through the oeuvre of the thinking kid's Rowling. It's the one with Calcifer the fire spirit, the girl magicked into a crone and the Welsh wizard. The Welsh bit's gone from the film*, which transposes the story to a version of Alsace-cum-Italy that Miyazaki packs with lever-driven, steam-powered cars and crazy plane designs taken from Albert Robida, futurist author/illustrator of *Le Vingtième Siècle* (1883). The film opens in Japan this November, where eyes will be down to see if it can succeed *Spirited Away* as the most popular non-English language film ever, which in turn may determine if we see it in Britain before 2010.

I missed twenty-odd minutes when *Howl* was shown at the Venice festival, thanks to the same shoddy organisation that caused Harvey Weinstein to demand the event director's drowning. That *Howl* is a wonderful carnival of ideas, *a la Spirited Away*, is undeniable; Miyazaki makes free play with Jones's book, injecting his charm and wit alongside the author's, inserting cheeky self-references for the fans (a magic bouncing scarecrow is drawn to recall Totoro, Miyazaki's most iconic fantasy creature) while keeping Jones's emphasis on surprise and turnaround and producing an exuberant jam between two great fantasy makers. Or maybe three, as the terrific title castle, reinvented as a fortress/factory/battleship on legs, has plainly fled a Gilliam doodle on *Monty Python*. What's less clear is

Miyazaki followed up Spirited Away this year with Howl's Moving Castle, based on the 1986 Diana Wynne Jones book from midway through the oeuvre of the thinking kid's Rowling



whether *Howl* makes thematic and structural sense, as *Spirited Away* does – it does, damnit! – to those who spot Miyazaki's references to personal soulbuilding through unalienated labour. Perhaps *Howl's* opening makes all clear, perhaps not, but anyway the film's ahead of Jackson or Cuarón in the joyousness of its screen magic.

Before *Howl*, British cinemas may get *Steamboy* by Katsuhiro (Akira) Otomo, and/or *Innocence*, Mamoru Oshii's sequel to *Ghost in the Shell*. From advance reports, *Steamboy* sounds like an

enjoyable slice of steampunk, set in 1851 England round the Great Exhibition with a look-in from George Stephenson, though it'll probably lack *Akira's* sublime angst, bombast and confusion. *Innocence* promises to be beautiful but impenetrable; anyone wanting a superb introduction to the dour Oshii should run out and buy Manga Entertainment's stupidly-named *Patlabor Mobile Police and the Movie* (sic), a double-DVD set of Oshii's films about an infectiously likeable police ensemble steering big robots against very human-level threats. (Watching *Patlabor 2*, Oshii's anti-US take on a fake war against terror, made in 1993, is deeply eerie today.) On Otomo's side, the quintessential buy is *Memories*, a beautiful *Twilight Zone*-esque anthology released in Britain nine years after he produced it in Japan and absolutely worth the wait, with its absurdist stench apocalypses and phantom opera-houses in space, all presented with admirably controlled intelligence.

The last recommendation foreshadows *Howl's Moving Castle*, whose non-Diana Wynne Jones-inspired images include a boy suddenly sprouting great wings from his shoulders. The same picture underlies *Vision of Escaflowne*, among the relatively few anime TV serials available in full on UK DVD. Detailing why *Escaflowne*, which shares *Spirited Away's* premise of a callow girl lost in a fantasy world, is worth your time and money (the series is spread over eight discs) would ruin an unfolding plot that reserves many of its best notions for late in a story with a determinate start, middle and end. Suffice it to say it's a genre fantasy with new ideas, inventive character arcs and passion. The latter element may throw some viewers in the first part, a consciously exaggerated pastiche of Japan's wide-eyed schoolgirl-romance comics and cartoons. But ten minutes in the animators show their chutzpah with a dragon-battle conveying truly mythic awe with a squintillionth of Peter Jackson's budget. If the big-eyed passion sounds scary, just skip to Part 2, as US distributors did when they hacked up *Escaflowne* for Fox Kids, reviving pop-interculture wars going back to *Battle of the Planets*. ☒

*although anyone who liked *Spirited Away* is stridently recommended to Miyazaki's brilliant 1986 film *Castle in the Sky*, which came out the same year as the *Howl* book and has a bolshy Welsh mining village – Miyazaki visited Wales during the '80s strikes – and Fleischer brothers-style giant robots stomping through steampunk retro-worlds two decades before *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*. Order the Japanese DVD if you can, which has decent subtitles unlike the UK edition.

PROBLEM PROJECT

HUGH A.D. SPENCER

PROGRESS REPORT

Sorry about missing the last scheduled transmission but I have a good excuse which will become clear as I continue. First, the administrative issues:

- 1. Send more drugs. The airborne contaminants in our region are far worse than we expected and some of the toxins are reacting with our reconstructive surgery. The Field Team personnel are uncomfortable and if we don't get some kind of treatment, I'm afraid somebody's face is going to melt.*
- 2. Has there been any progress in getting that Research Methodology Exemption? Central's restrictions on technology use and extra-planetary manifestations continue to be the single greatest source of frustration on this project. Trying to measure temporal anomalies and sub-space breakdown with Class 81 equipment is next to impossible. Please help us to do our job well.*
- 3. Now for the real news: in spite of your regulations, we are getting interesting results. More like disturbing results. There's lots we don't know yet, but one thing I can tell you is that we are dealing with more than a looped sequence pocket here. Every reliable reading from the Field Team has indicated that we have significant time-space breakdown here. I know it's not terribly helpful to tell you that things look bad, but right now, we don't know how bad or why. Of course, if we had better equipment . . .*



THERAPIST: Try to stay calm, Hal. Breathe slowly and tell me what's wrong.

HAL: It's burning me!

THERAPIST: Remember your exercises, Hal. Nothing can really hurt you. Whatever you see, it's just like watching it on a big screen in a movie theatre. Now, can you tell me what you see?

HAL: I don't want to look.

THERAPIST: Okay, let's go back to what happened before you became so frightened. Do you know how old you are in the dream?

HAL: I'm five years old, so it must be . . . 1960, 1961 . . .

THERAPIST: And what are you doing?

HAL: I'm coming home from school. Mrs Ratcliffe, my kindergarten teacher, told us to put away our scissors and glue and go home right away.

THERAPIST: Why did she do that?

HAL: It had something to do with the announcement from the Principal's office.

THERAPIST: What do you do next?

HAL: Watch TV. It's almost time for *Colonel Bleep*. Hey, the TV won't turn on!

THERAPIST: Why not?

HAL: I think there's no electricity, so I get up to tell

my mom . . . oh, no! Now I'm scared again!

THERAPIST: What's frightening you?

HAL: I look out the glass doors that lead out to the patio. There's a trail from a jet up in the sky . . . I really hate this, can I wake up now?

THERAPIST: Nothing can hurt you, Hal, you have to look at what you're afraid of.

HAL: Wow! It's like a star exploded! Now I can't see and it feels like hot wax is running down my cheeks . . . I think my eyes have melted!

THERAPIST: Breathe slowly. Your eyes are fine. Now go back to that time and tell me what really happened.

HAL: Everything feels different, now. The cartoons are almost over and my dad turns the channel to the news; he says he wants to watch a speech by President Kennedy.

THERAPIST: That's what really happened? You watched television with your father?

HAL: I guess so. Like I said, everything feels different now.

Megan was on the phone when Hal got home. She did not look happy. "No, no thank you," she said into the receiver.

Hal put his portfolio down and walked over to the kitchen.

It was Wednesday, so it would be vegetarian lasagna. Delicious, nutritious and environmentally responsible. Megan grew most of the ingredients herself.

"I really think you're wasting your time," Megan continued. "Frankly, I wouldn't even allow your products into my house, so I doubt that I would be interested in a year's free supply."

Hal had retrieved the glass dish from the oven and had scooped out a steaming brick of vegetable matter. Megan rolled her eyes. Hal sat down at the table and started eating.

"Yes!" Megan cried. "I am completely serious. Now, I really can't spare you any more time. Goodbye!" She applied more than necessary force to hang up the receiver. They had an old rotary phone, so Megan could express her opinions and feelings in this way.

Megan sat down across from Hal.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"Frozen waffles," replied Megan.

"I didn't know waffles knew how to use the telephone," said Hal.

"Seriously," she said. "These people have devised some new kind of freeze-dried waffle food product made from plastic molecules designed to simulate milk and eggs. They just offered us a year's free supply if we would let them come over and administer a taste test."

Hal extracted a tomato seed from between his teeth. Megan viewed most convenience foods and their packaging as a clear and present danger to the health of the planetary eco-system. To Megan, helping people to market these products would be somewhere close to signing up as the sacrifice in a satanic ritual.

Hal continued eating. It was good lasagna.

"So . . ." Megan began, just a little carefully " . . . did you make in progress in today's session?"

Probably not, Hal thought.

"I think so," was what he said. "She gave me some new relaxation exercises for the headaches."

PROGRESS REPORT

If you scan over to the end-files in this transmission you'll note that I have already completed the Official Reprimand Form which clearly outlines my technical violation, as well as the systems, procedures and materials involved. All you have to do is transmit the form on to Central. But since nobody ever reads the end files, I will summarize the violation:

- 1. I gave the Field Team permission to use the matter transformer to turn an abandoned office building into a titanium temporal sensor. In my view this is only a technical violation because: a) nobody saw us do it (except perhaps a few stray animals), and b) we returned the structure to its original form when we were finished. The only permanent change was when the transformation process vaporized some refuse and litter inside the building (okay, maybe a rat or two, as well). So, c) the office building is cleaner than when we found it.*
- 2. But there was no other option, we needed as powerful a sensor as possible. We're looking at something far more serious than a time-travel hazard; these are the most extreme disruptions ever tracked. If they continue, the Whole Fabric could collapse.*
- 3. And since the End of the Known Universe could much limit our options for career advancement, I would say that we are looking at a Very Bad Thing here.*

THERAPIST: Why are you breathing so heavily?

HAL: I'm trying to stay calm, like you taught me to.

THERAPIST: Is something frightening you again?

HAL: I'm pretty nervous. The sun is too hot.

THERAPIST: What are you doing?

HAL: I'm driving somewhere with my ex-wife, Susan. The air conditioning on the car has gone; every time we turn into the direct sunlight, the heat is almost unbearable. Susan is really out of it, so I'm pulling the car to the side of the road. I'm trying to find some shade under those trees over there . . . good god!

THERAPIST: What is it? What do you see?

HAL: I've stopped the car and I get out. I look up at the trees, the leaves are all shriveled up. All the trees are dead.

THERAPIST: What do you think killed all the trees?

HAL: The sun, it's getting hotter . . . now I see that the grass is all brown and gray . . . there's sparrows lying on the ground.

THERAPIST: What does Susan say?

HAL: Nothing. She's still in the car.

THERAPIST: You look upset, Hal. Is there something wrong with Susan?

HAL: I'm trying to wake her up –

"Are you taking more pills?" Megan's voice vibrated through the wood of the bathroom door.

"I have a headache." Hal washed down two blue capsules and closed the medicine cabinet.

"You're getting addicted to those things." Megan looked at Hal with disapproval as he opened the door into the bedroom.

"Maybe," was all Hal could say as he lowered himself onto the futon.

"You're ingesting chemical toxins," said Megan. "Your bloodstream is going to look like a PCB dumpsite."

Hal sighed. "Small price to pay."

Megan sat up and glared at him: "You had another of those dreams again, didn't you?"

Hal nodded. "It was the ozone hole one. You know, the one where Susan dies of radiation burns."

"Did you talk about it in your session this week?" Megan asked.

He rubbed his eyes. The drugs didn't really stop the headaches, they just made him apathetic about the pain. "Yes, I did tell her," Hal replied wearily. "She thinks I may be repressing some long-term hostility about the break-up of my marriage."

"Really?" Megan looked skeptical. She had met Susan a few times.

"I'm having a little trouble with that analysis," Hal said. Relief, not anger, was the primary emotion associated with Susan's departure.

"Well . . ." Now Megan sounded hesitant. "I still think you ought to keep up with the sessions. It's got to be better than dopping yourself up all the time."

"Okay," said Hal. "Nobody said hypnotherapy was a precision process."

They were silent for a time.

"Hal?"

"Yes, Megan?"

"How's the headache?"

"Still there."

"So, I guess sex is pretty much out of the question."
 "It is if you want me to join you."
 "I see." Megan tried hard not to sound annoyed.
 More silence. Then: "Hal?"
 "Yes, Megan."
 "Did you agree to participate in some voter demographics survey for the Libertarian Peoples Party?"
 Hal knew this scenario from previous headaches. With the prospect of love-making impossible, the time before sleep would be used as a household planning meeting.
 "Not that I remember," Hal replied.
 "Well, they said you did," Megan said. "They said they wanted to come around to the house and get you to fill out a survey."
 "I really don't know a thing about it," said Hal.
 "Well, they sound like a bunch of Nazis."
 Possibly, thought Hal.
 "If you didn't agree to take their survey," continued Megan, "why don't you call them up and tell them to go away?"
 "First thing."



PROGRESS REPORT

Or lack of progress report. I hope some data arranger at Central is getting genuine pleasure from the fact that as the universe unravels around us, my personnel have conformed to all cross-cultural and inter-species interaction regulations.

Frankly, I'm terrified, and I'm not sure anyone at Galactic Central really appreciates the magnitude of what we're sitting on here. I know you've received our findings, so do the math. Time particles can't bounce around like this without terrible consequences.

Our folklorist is struggling heroically with these restrictions as she continues to devise new 'culturally appropriate interactive strategies' for the Field Team. At least this keeps some of my personnel busy. In the absence of the new equipment I requested, we are searching for an 'existential informant', ie an inhabitant of this planet who might be personally experiencing some aspect of this time-space. If we can interrogate the right informant, we might find out how the phenomenon is playing out.

We are tracking several possible subjects.



THERAPIST: So, where are you now?
HAL: At a party, the first one I've been to since my divorce.
THERAPIST: When was that?
HAL: 1979, in the fall.
THERAPIST: What are you doing at the party?
HAL: Drinking too much.
THERAPIST: What's happening at the party? Are you having a good time?
HAL: Lots of people are there and they're having lots of fun. They're all very young and attractive.
THERAPIST: How does that make you feel?
HAL: Absolutely terrible. I don't know how to be single anymore.
THERAPIST: So what happens next?
HAL: I start wandering around, looking for somewhere to sit. That's when I see her.
THERAPIST: Who do you see?
HAL: Megan, for the first time. She's wearing these huge earrings and this peasant skirt. She reminds me of a cross between Eleanor Roosevelt and Kate Bush.

THERAPIST: And what is Megan doing?
HAL: She's telling off a couple of skinheads who are wearing T-shirts that read BOMB THE BOATS AND FEED THE FISHES.
THERAPIST: What are the skinheads doing?
HAL: They look like they can't think of anything to say. Mostly they look scared and nervous, She's really blasting them.
THERAPIST: And how are you reacting to this?
HAL: Well, she's going on and on now. I look around and most of the people at the Party look like they're hoping she'll shut up soon.
THERAPIST: How do you feel about what Megan is saying, Hal? Do you want her to stop talking?
HAL: Well, I think she's maybe a little nuts for taking on the skinheads, but no, I think I like her. At least she believes in something . . . Hey!
THERAPIST: What is it, Hal?
HAL: That's funny!
THERAPIST: What do you mean, Hal?
HAL: Now she's just come over to me and asks why I'm smiling at her, she thinks I'm laughing at her . . .
THERAPIST: Hal, you stopped just then, what happened?
HAL: Scene change. We're having breakfast at Megan's apartment.
THERAPIST: Anything you want to say about the interval of time you skipped?
HAL: No, it's personal.
THERAPIST: But you can talk about what happened afterwards?
HAL: Sure, it's a nice sunny morning and we're eating something strange and crunchy. Whatever it is, it tastes better than it looks.
THERAPIST: It sounds wonderful. So why did you tell me this was a bad dream?
HAL: I'm not sure I want to remember this.
THERAPIST: Remember what?
HAL: I want to wake up now. Can I please wake up now?
THERAPIST: Hal, you have to try to make progress here. To get past the pain, you'll have to face what caused it. What happens next?
HAL: Megan gets up and answers the door. It's the lady who lives down the hall. She's almost hysterical.
THERAPIST: Why?
HAL: It's something she wants us to see on TV. The lady doesn't speak English too well, I think she wants Megan to explain to her what's going on. We go over to the lady's apartment. There's a lot of kids there, probably watching cartoons before the news bulletins started.
THERAPIST: News bulletins?
HAL: Something about the Soviets in Afghanistan leading to some kind of an exchange in Europe. Now there's an announcement from NATO . . . there's been another exchange with them and the Russians. Megan looks pale and says something in Spanish to the lady. God, everybody's crying. Like a moron, I ask Megan to tell me what's going on.
THERAPIST: What does she say, Hal?
HAL: What the hell do you think? The missiles are in the air, we have less than twenty minutes before they hit!



Megan was tying back the huge mass of her black hair. "Can't

stay," she said as Hal approached the bathroom. "I have to chair this week's meeting."

Hal nodded. This was the weekly meeting of the local chapter of the Earth Defense Fund. They probably wanted to be sure to cash the last cheque he'd written them.

Megan charged into the bedroom. "How was your session?" she called out.

Hal looked through the bedroom doorway and watched Megan tighten a woven belt over a faded batik skirt. Twenty years in the same wardrobe, he thought, and she still looks good. "It was probably my last," Hal said.

"What happened?" Megan demanded.

"My therapist says I'm not going to get better if I'm not prepared to be honest with her. I thinking about not continuing with the sessions." Hal could feel another headache coming on. This probably had nothing to do with his dreams; he was just thinking about all the money they'd spent on hypnotism.

"You know that our health insurance doesn't cover this." Megan was thinking the same thing.

"I know."

They sat in silence for a moment. "Well, I think that really undermines my confidence in hypnotherapy," Megan said eventually. Typical, thought Hal. Megan immediately sided with him; she wouldn't think for an instant that the therapist might be right.

The intercom buzzed. Megan got up and pushed the speaker button. "Ultimate Vacuum," a voice squawked out. "We're here for your free demonstration."

"You're going to have to deal with this," Megan said to Hal as she opened the front door. "I really wish you wouldn't agree to this stuff."

"But, I didn't –" began Hal.

Megan disappeared down the hall. "Especially now . . ." Her voice trailed off. Megan was gone. Off to save the world, once again, thought Hal.

A few moments later the representatives of the Ultimate Vacuum Cleaner Corporation were in the living room. They introduced themselves as Ms Wiper and Mr Chaffey. Both were like every sales representative Hal had ever seen: people who had spent just a little too much money on the wrong clothes and the wrong haircuts. "I hope you don't mind that I brought my associate Mr Chaffey along," said Ms Wiper. "He's a trainee and this is part of his in-field development."

Mr Chaffey struggled to open a large aluminum-lined suitcase.

"Happy to help," replied Hal.

"It's very kind of your . . ." Ms Wiper paused and glanced meaningfully at Hal " . . . partner? To agree to this demonstration."

Hal was surprised. Megan had agreed to this? She must have forgotten.

Within a couple of minutes, Ms Wiper and Mr Chaffey had assembled what they called the 'Millennium Model of the Ultimate Vacuum Purification System'. Then Ms Wiper pointed at the wall of Greenpeace and Amnesty International posters lining the far wall of the living room.

"I see that your household is concerned with social justice and environmental responsibility," Ms Wiper said. "Then the Millennium Model is just the product for you. It is a completely green system, built from all recycled and ecologically friendly materials. This vacuum was designed by an egalitarian technocooperative and manufactured by an all-union worker owned facility in Saskatchewan. The Millennium Model was created to maintain natural domestic eco-systems through powerful but sympathetic cleaning mechanisms."

This is the most adaptive sales pitch I've ever heard, thought

Hal. Megan will be really sorry she missed this.

Then Ms Wiper and Mr Chaffey went into the detailed demonstration. They explained all the nozzles and attachments; they used an innovative new power sweeper to pull dirt out of a rug that already looked clean; and they vividly illustrated the sheer power of the Ultimate Vacuum's motor by sucking up some big bullets.

Eventually, they pulled out a handful of documents: sales agreements and payment plans.

At this point, Hal felt ethically bound to stop the demonstration. "I'm very sorry," he said to Ms Wiper and Mr Chaffey. "You have a very interesting vacuum cleaner, but my partner and I really can't afford any major purchases right now."

Mr Chaffey looked over to Ms Wiper. "Have we met all the criteria?" he asked.

Ms Wiper nodded. "We've established our presence in completely native terms."

This didn't mean a thing to Hal. "Excuse me . . ." he began.

They still weren't paying any attention to him; Mr Chaffey reached over and opened a panel at the back of the Ultimate Vacuum machine.

"I just hope this is the right guy," Ms Wiper said.

An oscillating sound came from inside the Ultimate Vacuum. Mr Chaffey looked at something moving there and nodded his head. "Oh, yeah," he said. "This is the one, we're right at the centre of the Temporal Distortion."

"I don't think we have anything like that around here," said Hal.

Ms Wiper pointed her finger at Hal. "Quiet," she said.

This is really rude, thought Hal. He got up from the futon with the intention of opening the door and escorting the sales representatives out. But then, somewhat unexpectedly, the tip of Ms Wiper's finger popped off and a flash of copper flew across the room. A tiny metal shard imbedded itself in Hal's neck, and he fell to the floor.

He was still conscious, but he couldn't move. Mr Chaffey rolled him onto his back, which gave him a good look at the Ultimate Vacuumat very close range. Hal could see Mr Chaffey pull out what looked like a pulsating mass of light and metal from inside the machine.

"Can he talk?" asked Mr Chaffey.

"I only used a small dose," Ms Wiper replied. "Only the gross motor functions are shut down."

Hal really wished that he was completely unconscious because he could have avoided being aware of what was going to happen next: Mr Chaffey pulled out two flexible cables from inside the Ultimate Vacuum. There were three-inch glass needles at the end of each cable. Mr Chaffey carefully positioned the needles over Hal's forehead and then plunged them into Hal's skull.

Ouch, thought Hal. Another headache.



INTERROGATOR #1:	Can you hear me, sir? Can you speak?
HAL:	Yes.
INTERROGATOR #2:	Sir, have you been experiencing attacks of disorientation and confusion?
HAL:	All the time. Can you be more specific?
INTERROGATOR #1:	Do you feel like the normal sequence of cause and effect is breaking down in your life?
HAL:	Ouch! Ow!
INTERROGATOR #2:	The readings say he doesn't understand your question.
HAL:	Jeez, this really hurts . . . ow . . . arghhhh!

INTERROGATOR #1: Take it easy, sir. This is much less painful if you concentrate on answering the questions. And try to use actual words whenever possible.

HAL: Eeeek! Okay, okay, I'll try.

INTERROGATOR #2: Now, can you tell us if you've been having any really unusual experiences recently?

HAL: Before tonight? Not really.

INTERROGATOR #2: Instruments say he's telling the truth.

INTERROGATOR #1: That's impossible, he's at dead centre in the disruption!

HAL: Oh, god, this is almost as bad as the nightmares!

INTERROGATOR #2: He could be interpreting the breakdown as subconscious events.

INTERROGATOR #1: You're having strange dreams?

HAL: Yeah, I have recurring dreams. Bad dreams. And I have headaches when I wake up.

INTERROGATOR #1: How often do you have these dreams?

HAL: It varies. Sometimes they happen a lot, sometimes hardly ever.

INTERROGATOR #1: Have you had a bad dream recently?

HAL: Day before yesterday.

INTERROGATOR #2: We picked up some serious phenomena that night.

INTERROGATOR #1: What was that dream about, sir?

HAL: I'm sitting in High Park. There's bodies everywhere. Some people in gas masks and plastic suits are putting them in big baggies. I'm coughing up blood, yup, I'm dying. Looks like everybody's dying.

INTERROGATOR #1: Why is everyone dying?

HAL: Plague. Incredibly infectious, its like the whole planet's immune system has collapsed.

INTERROGATOR #2: Was this a really vivid dream? Like it was almost real?

HAL: Absolutely real.

INTERROGATOR #1: Was this dream like the others?

HAL: Every dream is like this! Every dream is about the end of the world!

INTERROGATOR #1: The end of your world?

HAL: My world? Yeah, I guess so. I have a really terrible nightmare about some new way that the human race gets destroyed, but then its like a big flickering effect in my head, and I wake up.

INTERROGATOR #1: You wake up and then what happens?

HAL: The world is back to normal, everybody's there. And I have an incredible migraine.

INTERROGATOR #1: And nothing's changed?

HAL: For a while it feels like everything's changed.

PROGRESS REPORT

I shouldn't have been too surprised at the way that poor creature was experiencing what Central has so carefully labeled 'the Advanced T/S Irregularity'. Given their native level of knowledge, the only way he could have interpreted the regular cycle of planetary destruction and re-creation would be as a dream or a hallucination. Our folklorist

and technician advise me that the subject was a remarkably unimaginative man, so he believed himself to be the victim of chronic nightmares.

I will not, however, dwell on their lack of scientific insight into the situation, because despite all the readings we still have no credible explanation of the 'Irregularity'. Perhaps some system-wide catastrophe was so profound that it caused an expanding temporal loop that endlessly generated new ways for this tiny world to end. Certainly, we have no evidence of any intelligent agency at work. I can't resist pointing out that we might not have to resort to speculation if Central had allocated the equipment I originally requested.

Whatever started the cycle, we are about to end it. Once we pass into the safety zone past the edge of this solar system, the dark-matter device we directed at their sun will detonate. I've never seen these devices in operation before, but I understand that it there won't be much to see when the inner planets implode. It might be interesting to see what happens to the big gas giants though.

I'm getting sidetracked here. Just so you know, I feel pretty bad about destroying this solar system and all its inhabitants. There was nothing really wrong with those Earthers. But I suppose this 'cosmological triage' (as Central so elegantly puts it) is actually necessary in this case. We can't let an escalating temporal loop start to unravel the structure of reality. I keep telling myself that the planet was probably doomed anyway – we're just making it final.

If nothing else, we were able to put that poor dreamer out of his misery.

Incredible winds. The ground disintegrating. Enormous pressure.

Nothing.

It was over very quickly.

The dream was over so fast that Hal wasn't sure how to describe it. But the dream had generated a huge headache. Full aura migraine. When he sat up in bed Hal discovered that he couldn't see out of one eye.

It took more than ten minutes for Hal to put on his housecoat and drag himself into the kitchen. Megan was drinking herbal tea and listening to public radio. The muted voices of the Sunday morning news program were talking about the Galactic Superculture. This was a big news story a few years ago when the Superculture's signal was first picked up. But the excitement died down when it was revealed that the aliens wouldn't actually arrive for another fifty or sixty years. Now, only NPR and CBC seemed to carry anything about it anymore.

Megan was still interested because she had just helped set up a group to lobby the Federal Government to release the original radio transmissions from the Superculture. The group was convinced that vital information about the safety of the planet was being withheld.

Hal didn't mind though. Save-the-World Megan needed occasional fresh doses of agitprop activity to keep her sharp.

Megan saw Hal's ashen face. "Oh, no!" she cried. "Not another one!"

It hurt when Hal nodded his head.

"Sit down and have some tea," she said. "And keep your eyes closed."

Hal took Megan's advice. The tea (he never could tell one herb from another) did seem to ease the pain. And in the darkness, Hal could smell all of Megan's familiar smells. This made him feel better.

And thankful that he was one of Megan's causes, too.

Hugh has had stories broadcast on national radio and published in various magazines such as *On Spec* and anthologies such as *Tesseract 8*. He lives in Toronto.

NEW FROM EARTHLING PUBLICATIONS

Los Angeles. Criminy. He's still only in Los Angeles.

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Published December 2004 as 400 numbered, perfectbound softcovers, signed by Russell (\$14) and 15 lettered, handmade, slipcased hardcovers, signed by Russell, McAuley, and Potter – \$150



"You know something is working right in the universe when Joe Santos gets a semi-regular role on The Sopranos and there's a new Jay Russell-Marty Burns out there... that it's as good as 'Apocalypse Now, Voyager' is pretty much proof that reality ought to be recommissioned for another series." –KIM NEWMAN

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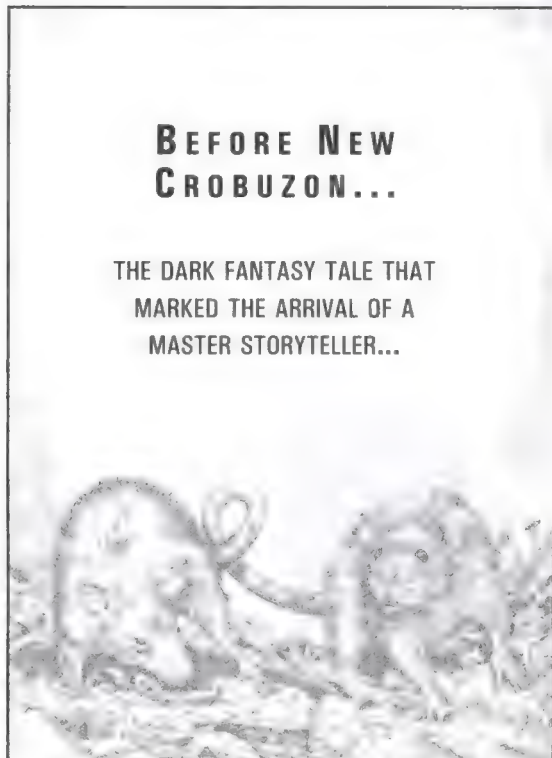
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VARIOUS AUTHORS

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BOOK REVIEWS

Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell
Susanna Clarke

Bloomsbury hb, 782pp, £17.99

**JONATHAN
STRANGE****Mr NORRELL**by
Susanna Clarke

My first encounter with the work of Susanna Clarke took place within the pages of *Datlow & Windling's Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, where even amongst the literary jewels the

editors had gathered in the year 2000, Clarke's contribution, 'Mr Simonelli, or The Fairy Widower', possessed such a confident style, humour and beauty that it shone out as the work of a writer of remarkable accomplishment. It was her fourth appearance in the *Year's Best* collection – an enviable achievement for a writer who only began publishing fiction in 1996.

Her first novel, *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell*, has been longlisted for the 2004 Man Booker Prize and the *Guardian* First Book Award, rights have been sold in nineteen countries, and I have heard it lauded as the *Harry Potter* for adults. It is an extraordinary welcome for a fantasy novel by a generally unknown first novelist, and in the face of my own anticipation and such pre-publication hype – could this novel about magic and fairies possibly be anything other than a disappointment?

The story is set in a slightly alternative England in the early years of the 19th Century. At the time of the story English magic is already a dying phenomenon, since the disappearance into legend of the Raven King, a human child brought up by the fairies who was the greatest magician of them all. Enter the reclusive Mr Norrell of Hurlfrew Abbey – in a marvellous demonstration he brings to life the statues of York Cathedral before setting off to London to re-establish English magic. His foil and pupil is the brilliant younger magician Jonathan Strange, but a personality clash and differing ambitions cause their partnership to founder. Norrell wants to

keep magic to himself and is suspicious of the fairy people, but Strange sets off in pursuit of the Raven King himself.

The story combines very real historical events and figures – the Napoleonic wars and the Duke of Wellington, the poet Byron, Mad King George – with the most haunting and atmospheric evocation of magic and Faery and it is a very alluring combination. Clarke writes as though she were a novelist of the time, with a salting of 19th Century spellings and idiom that works very well. Most attempts by authors to write in an old world style end up sounding cringingly bad, but Clarke pulls it off. She counts Jane Austen as one of her favourite writers and certainly there is a flavour of Austen in this novel, but it brings to mind Charles Dickens even more, with



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its huge cast of closely observed and quirky characters and the breadth of the tone, from the homely to the heroic, the laugh-out-loud funny to the profoundly frightening.

It is some of the secondary characters who stay most in my mind at the end of the book – particularly Childermass, the put-upon servant of Mr Norrell, Vinculus the street magician and Stephen, a most endearing servant desperately trying to escape a fairy enchantment. But most remarkable of all, for me, is Clarke's depiction of Faery, the place that exists alongside the mundane world, full of cruelty, beauty, shadows and illusions. Her evocation of the Other is astonishing and stirring and puts her in the league of some of our finest writers: Peter Vansittart, Tanith Lee, George MacDonald and Robert Holdstock.

It is a very fine literary novel. It is an enormous 800 pages long, but doesn't read like it. The plot is actually fairly flimsy and huge chunks of the story – particularly the sections about Strange's adventures in the Napoleonic wars – do not advance the narrative at all. But this doesn't matter one bit; the world of the novel is such a marvellous place, the reader is quite happy to enjoy the ride and it is never dull.

Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell didn't make the Booker shortlist but I'm sure it'll be a huge success – and deservedly so.

Rosanne Rabinowitz

The Algebraist
Iain M. Banks

Orbit hb, 534pp, £17.99



Perhaps suffering a slightly unwieldy title, there's nevertheless nothing by-the-numbers about Banks's new space opera. The rich detail and satirical mania that have characterised his previous world-building efforts are in evidence again here, as we encounter

"FULL OF CRUELTY, BEAUTY, SHADOWS AND ILLUSIONS"

alien races dwelling inside gas giants (Dwellers), others morbidly collecting dead bodies and species (Morbs), and AIs – or ‘anathematics’ as they are labelled – hunted down by ‘Mercatorial’ authorities. Although this is not a Culture novel, Banks seems to allocate the greatest eccentricities and bouts of peevish word play to his AI characters, in a move reminiscent of his focus on the Culture’s ships and drones in many earlier novels. And in his depiction of galactic authorities divided into arcane subcategories of hegemonic rule and managerial specialisation, Banks sets out to mock forms and expressions of socio-cultural power. Indeed, there is a lot of fun to be had here from revelling in expansively Borgésian lists, labyrinthine libraries and borderline-surreal taxonomies, as Banks takes an idea, image or metaphor and exaggeratedly spins it out via his alien characters’ and cultures’ classifications of their worlds.

‘The Algebraist’ remains a mysterious non-presence until at least page 166 of this novel, although Banks teasingly prefigures its appearance by beginning Part One with a reference to the ‘algebra of justice’. The mathematics in question, it is suggested, is not literal calculus so much as an emotional equation, an algorithm of sentiment transforming certain characters’ views and purposes in life. While one subplot tracks this ‘algebra of justice’, operating very much at a human scale of interpersonal relationships, betrayal and possible subterfuge, other plot elements arc across galactic politics and take a more self-consciously ‘epic’ route to their eventual destinations.

The protagonist and lynchpin of *The Algebraist* is Fassin Taak. He is a Seer whose life is dedicated to learning from the post-civilisational culture of the Dwellers – a ‘Slow’ species who have existed for many millennia, and who view so-called ‘Quick’ species as momentary interruptions of their grandly enduring existence. Taak’s task is to ‘delve’ into Dweller society, attempting to learn from his respondents and

sources by re-sequencing their capriciously random libraries and data-stores. While the Mercatorial authorities, a type of planetary federation, allow Banks to belittle the decadence that arises through absolute corporate power, Seers and Dwellers represent further brands of decadence – namely those emerging through academia and nobility. The Seers have their own rites and rituals to secure ‘proper’ knowledge, mirroring the fussing of aesthete Dwellers who are obsessed with their



Perhaps suffering a slightly unwieldy title, there’s nevertheless nothing by-the-numbers about Banks’s new space opera. The rich detail and satirical mania that have characterised his previous world-building efforts are in evidence again here

kudos and lengthy chronology. Both Seers and Dwellers are multifaceted creations that Banks never fully deifies nor excuses.

Added to this mass of viewpoints is the arch-decadence of Archimandrite Luseferous, a typically Banksian ‘psychopathic sadist with a fertile imagination’ who joins the quest for ‘The Algebraist’. Perhaps a code, a frequency, a signal, this bit of algebraic information sought by Luseferous *et al* apparently holds the key to attaining galactic power and near-instantaneous space travel across vast distances. Banks does a good job of justifying and shoring up his different characters’ need to acquire this Grail of galactic wayfaring, and plays more than a few narrative tricks along the way. Luseferous doesn’t quite get what he bargained for, and nor does the reader, as staple elements of the space opera – and characters we think we know – are all playfully reconfigured. This exuberant playfulness even extends to the book’s layout: the symbol used to separate sections of text, a dot with a line under it, comes to have a very specific meaning in ‘Dweller standard notation’, and a meaning which actually unlocks the novel’s key mystery... And yet it has been under the reader’s nose all along, seeming to be an incidental, unimportant typographic tic.

The Algebraist finally offers a quest that questions itself and it boasts a brilliant series of plot twists working to challenge the value of pure ‘information’ versus its interpretations. Delighting in the kind of ‘out-of-left-field’ narrative feints that have characterised Banks’s previous work within and without science fiction, this novel offers as much exhilaration through sheer verbiage and authorial prolixity as it does through intricately plotted shocks and cleverly thought-out alien cultures. Brimming with wry, caustic humour and vivid, energetic creativity, *The Algebraist* yet again shows Iain M. Banks to be a consummate player of science fiction’s best games.

Matt Hills

The Runes of the Earth

Stephen Donaldson

Gollancz hb, 593pp, £18.99



1977 was the year that readers were first able to spend time in Donaldson's creation *The Land*, and it has been 21 years since the sixth and apparently final volume was

published. So it is heaps of nostalgia, and no short measure of curiosity, that has had me looking forward to a long overdue return visit. *The Runes of the Earth* is the first of four books entitled *The Last Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*.

Linden Avery the Chosen has spent the ten years since the death of Thomas Covenant working as Chief Medical Officer at the Berenford Memorial Hospital, a small-town psychiatric unit where one of her patients is Joan Covenant, Thomas's ex-wife. Linden despairs of ever really being able to help Joan, who had been left deeply mentally disturbed by previous events, but things begin to change dramatically when Joan's son, Roger, arrives to remove her

from the hospital to care for her at home. Linden knows that Roger has other motives than his mother's welfare, but is unable to determine them or prevent Joan's eventual kidnapping. In a desperate effort to retrieve Joan from Roger's clutches, Linden, along with her adopted son Jeremiah, Roger and Joan, are all drawn once again to *The Land*.

Finding herself once more alone on Kevin's Watch, she is joined by a blind, apparently mad old man called Anele who is seemingly fleeing for his life. It soon becomes apparent that hundreds of years have passed in *The Land* since Linden was last there, despite it being only a decade in her own world, and she desperately needs to find out what has been going on – what has changed, what has happened to Roger, Joan and Jeremiah who are no longer with her. However, before Anele can be coaxed into answering any of her questions, Kevin's Watch is struck by a Caesure . . . the new current bane of *The Land*.

Despite *The Chronicles* being continually in print since first publication, this book starts with a very useful potted history of 'the story so far' – a great help to the reader who may be

trying to remember a story read twenty-plus years ago. The characters are nearly all new, and in many cases are descended directly from characters previously known. The history of *The Land* and the collective memories of its peoples have subtly changed however, and their motivations and roles in the great scheme of things have too. So, familiar is about as close as it gets, and the reader is once again swept along on a tide of doom and gloom without really knowing, at this stage anyway, exactly what Linden and her new company are up against.

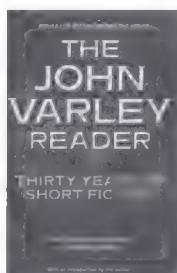
Donaldson's writing style is still 'difficult' and at times obscure, with his penchant for using words only those with a retentive dictionary knowledge can hope not to stumble over. He still has his favourite words too, one in particular will vindicate many of his critics, grate on the reader, and yet still provide hours of light-hearted entertainment at genre conventions in Britain, if not globally.

The Runes of the Earth is the book that all Donaldson fans have been waiting for, and I won't need to convince any of them to read it – nor will any of them be disappointed.

The John Varley Reader

John Varley

Ace, 624pp, \$16



The late 1970s were a great time to be a North American teenager discovering science fiction.

Magazines like *Galaxy* and *Galileo* were still around, older SF could be found with judicious

scrounging in used book stores, early generations of authors had not yet been collected by the Grim Reaper. Best of all, talented writers of all sorts were flooding into the marketplace. John Varley was one of these exciting new authors, one who chose to set most of his fiction in various post-Mariner, -Venera, and -Voyager solar systems, settings that were hostile to unmodified humans but where a suitably cunning human or post-human might find a niche to live and to prosper. Or any number of niches, because he is not an author who relies on just one solution.

Varley never stopped writing short

material but it became a smaller and smaller percentage of his output. The most recent collection of his short fiction published was 1986's *Blue Champagne*. I am happy to say the drought is over with *The John Varley Reader*, a collection of stories and autobiographical introductions.

Many of Varley's short works fall into one or the other of two settings, settings that are in many ways mirror images of each other. One is the Eight Worlds, fairly upbeat about the liberating potential of technology, and the other is the world of the Anne Marie Bach police procedurals, as advanced in its way as the Eight Worlds, but with social and technological limitations, such as the failure of commercial fusion, that compel darker tales.

For example, sex-changing is a technology so common as to be beneath comment in the Eight Worlds. Everyone uses it, and the casual mutability of gender has eliminated gender-based prejudices. Varley set up the Eight Worlds with this technology as part of the basic toolkit and only later went back to examine how society reacted to the introduction of sex-changing in his story 'Options'. In

'Options' Varley took a look at how sex-change technology was introduced, not in the trivial aspect of the research and design end of things but the more messy integration into a functioning society. In many ways the social changes in 'Options' parallel the changes we have seen over the last thirty years with respect to how homosexuals are seen by society at large, unusually prescient for a story written only ten years after the Stonewall Riots.

Although the first Bach story, 'Bagatelle', which reveals that terrorist use of nuclear devices is common, is inexplicably missing from this collection, we do get the second Bach story, 'The Barbie Murders', which happens to have some of the same themes as 'Options'. As in the Eight Worlds, technology allows people to recreate themselves but unlike the Eight Worlds, the splinter culture in this story used this transformative technology to limit themselves, to create a community that allows its members, the 'Barbies' of the title, to conform to a narrow and rigid set of standards. When a Barbie is murdered in Bach's Lunar city of New Dresden, Bach is forced into contact with

The Mark of Ran

Paul Kearney

Bantam pb, 339pp. £10.99



The Mark of Ran is the first novel in a new series entitled *The Sea Beggars*.

15-year-old Rol lives with his Grandfather and others he thinks of as family on the smallest of the Seven Isles, Dennifrey – a fishing island. With the sea in his blood, Rol dreams of one day Captaining his own ship and crew. All is not well on Dennifrey though, where he and his 'family' are shunned by the native Dennifreyans because, as his Grandfather puts it, of 'ancient hatreds and superstitions'. Rol tries to learn more about his mother and father from his less than forthcoming Grandfather, but at a point when he feels he is about to learn all, the opportunity is lost forever as the locals decide to rid Dennifrey of their fears.

Fleeing Dennifrey for his life Rol makes for Ascari, the capital of Gascar, in a little inshore fishing sloop which is unsuitable for deep water sailing. His Grandfather's dying words were for Rol to seek a man

called Michal Psellos and 'tell him you are Cortishane – he is . . . a friend'. When Rol eventually finds Michal however, having survived a harsh journey where only his wits kept him alive, he finds a cruel master rather than a friend.

A new chapter in Rol's life begins. He finally learns just who and what he is, and why he is feared wherever he goes. The source of that learning however cannot be trusted, and an eventual confrontation shapes Rol's life for years to come.

Although not apparently related to Kearney's previous *Monarchies of God* series, there are similarities in that this series is also based on a seafaring scenario. The 'young parentless boy grows up and learns of his terrible origins' theme is hardly new in fantasy today, but it is well written and nicely handled by Kearney, and introduces some interesting but complicated characters. *The Mark of Ran* is a fairly dark, compelling read, and bodes well for the next book in the series – though hopefully this series will not be stretched to the limits as the previous one was and a few trees can live longer before becoming books. I'd certainly recommend this to folks who enjoy their action on the high seas.

Vikki Lee France

this isolationist society. The investigation reveals that new societies breed new taboos; the murder was motivated for reasons that could not exist in the less constrained world of mainstream New Dresden. As is typical for the Bach procedurals and for Bach's world, the story itself is well crafted but the resolution Bach manages to squeeze out of the situation is a partial victory at best.

Part of the pleasure of reading this book was encountering old friends on pages that were not yellowing with age. 'Air Raid', the original and superior version of what eventually became the novel basis for the film *Millennium* is in here and so is 'In the Halls of the Martian Kings', a story of survival on a Mars not as deprived of life as it might at first seem. Even better, stories which I had missed the first time round are included, from the collectors of 'In Fading Suns and Dying Moons' to 'Good Intentions', a deal-with-the-devil story that managed to surprise me with its in retrospect logical ending.

Varley's strengths are best shown off at shorter lengths. Take, for example, the short story 'Air Raid', as compared to the

novel length expansion *Millennium*. The novel adds a significant character, and more details about why the people of the future are kidnapping people from the past, but also continues about one chapter too far when it reveals at the end that God, or someone very much like him, is behind the tragic events and that the entire thing has been a variation on that hackneyed cliché, the science fictional Garden of Eden story. The short story, on the other hand, obviously has less room to develop characters other than the protagonist, but manages to convey most of the necessary background information without having room for God to show up.

I noticed while rereading this collection that Varley seems to have quietly pioneered in both the Eight Worlds and Bach's world the modern version of the post-human milieu without getting as much credit for it as other, more famous authors.

Although I think this is a very good place for someone unfamiliar with Varley to begin, since it spans most of his career, I do have one reservation about Varley's fiction. I am unenthusiastic about his use in several stories of sex between

Gig

James Lovegrove

PS Publishing, 257pp. hb £35, deluxe slipcase £60

God dog are on the last date of their tour, returning to their home city. Mik, the front man, is disenchanted and promises that this will be a night to remember. Kim, a lookalike fan, finds herself entrusted (via dream or mania) with a murderous task.

What makes this book special is the detail that Lovegrove has put into it. The back to back stories mesh and wonderfully complement each other, examining details from different perspectives. His city is wonderfully imagined, hewn in grey with the occasional flash of colour. The author draws on the 'Ziggy Stardustness' of the central drama, perhaps reliving his own youth, but retaining the mystery.

Lovegrove casts his satirical eye over the nature of fandom, particularly in the all too familiar divisions between the notions of early and late. He finds the very human qualities of the characters and plays to them, allowing the humour and the reality of the situation to come to the fore. There is a sense that there is a need to escape, a need to restore the previous status quo, but he still does not find it. Too much has changed for each player.

Harking back to British genre peculiarities, such as the cosy catastrophe, Lovegrove delivers a wonderfully palindromic tale. This is one gig for which you'd give your eye teeth for a backstage pass.

The Fourth Circle

Zoran Zivkovic

Ministry of Whimsy hb, 240pp. \$27

Attentive readers will have noted Zivkovic's short fiction in *Interzone* and already pegged him as one of the brightest talents in European genre writing. He ranges from the New Wave writers to the non-anglophone writers of magical realism, such as Calvino and Borges, through to resourceful pastiche. Through it all he retains his own identity, an outside observer.

The Fourth Circle is a strange and wondrous novel in four parts, each with its own identity, theme and voice. Zivkovic balances these worlds, bringing them to a satisfying conclusion, delivering some deft lines and imagery (although some of it is downright disturbing).

It should remind the reader that genre should be edgy, dangerous and provocative, making the reader mull the ideas over in their mind after the book has been closed. It draws from a variety of sources – classic SF, buddhism, magical realism, the locked-room mystery – reminding the reader that genre should be hybrids, that it cannot remain sealed from other literatures. As it is a translated book, there are one or two common phrases that jar, but this is a minor quibble in what is one of the most bizarre, yet entertaining reads that has presented itself this year.

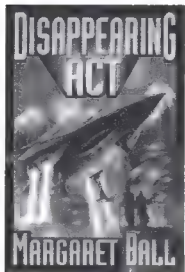
Iain Emsley

youths and the adults, especially adult in positions of authority over the teens, from parents to teachers. Perhaps I am merely displaying the prejudices of a person of my time and place but I found this aspect of the stories in question tremendously off-putting, particularly in 'The Persistence of Vision', where the youthful lover of the protagonist is a very youthful teen when the protagonist meets her. I note that most of the stories with teen-adult pairings are older stories, so what I object to may simply reflect the changes in society since the 1970s.

The only way I can see for Varley to have produced a better collection would have been to take the route recently taken with Clarke and Tenn, and go for a Complete Short Fiction of John Varley. Even incomplete as it is, Varley has seen fit to include ample autobiographical notes on each story, as Tenn did in his two volume set. The author's comments alone make this collection a must have, even for people who own Varley's previous collections.

Disappearing Act Margaret Ball

Baen, 304pp, \$22



One of my many weaknesses is the competent mid-lister. These are people who aren't household names, who may be destined for obscurity in a generation's time (no shame, most authors of all

qualities are forgotten), whose fiction may borrow standard props from a common pool (also no shame – what's a common culture for if not to share?) and whose prose might not be polished as it could be. They *do* have a clear idea where they want to end a story when they begin it, and they can produce a complete story in one volume. Every time I pick up a book like Simmons's *Illum*, a highly praised incomplete piece of a larger work, I appreciate the simple art of writing what I will diplomatically call Complete Novels more and more. I blame publishers for printing stories in installments, but I blame readers more for buying these fragments. Most of the habitual flaws in SF can be tracked back to the readers' choice to put up with those flaws.

Disappearing Act belongs to what I am beginning, on very shaky grounds, to think of as the Baen Standard Future. The

props are standard, from jump points to ansibles. It is far enough in the future for worlds to have native human cultures but not so far that their thoughts and values are utterly alien to us. The setting is semi-balkanized, and although Ball has a Federation, worlds within it have a lot of autonomy. Like many military SF writers, Ball borrows from history, using early Raj era India as a template for her Kalapriya, as it is progressively dominated by the Barents Trading Society, Barents being a more advanced world not entirely unlike Victorian England with Atomic Tailfins. This is not military SF but adventure fiction and unlike most military SF, *Disappearing Act* is actually interesting.

The story is very familiar: Maris, a naive young woman (in this case a criminal) finds herself put in a position where she must pose as an agent of a powerful and respected agency. This attracts the attention of people who believe her lie and are threatened by it. By keeping herself alive she is forced to deal with far larger issues affecting Kalapriya. There are other viewpoint characters, the most interesting of whom is Chulayen, whose well-intended attempts to be a good bureaucrat in a despicable society leads to disaster for his family and an unwanted transformation for Chulayen.

It would be easy to snipe at the flaws in this book, such as the almost completely stock SF setting and the unoriginal way Ball adapts the India of one time and England of a slightly later period for her story. Unlike certain other authors who mine the past, Ball is aware that situations like the Raj are not unmixed blessings, and that villains can be found in ample supply both in imperial and native populations. There are scenes that are very standard for this sort of story but others, such as the one in which the fates of Chulayen's wife and children are decided by mere chance, are genuinely gripping.

Reflex Steven Gould

Tor, \$24.95



In 1992, Tor published Gould's first novel, *Jumper*, a solidly written young adult novel about a boy named Davy who discovers that he can teleport, who then has to decide what he will do with

this new talent. *Reflex* is the sequel. I was concerned about two aspects of this book. Sequels written a decade or more after the original often fail to satisfy, perhaps because so much time allows the author to become a very different person. Also, this is Gould's very first sequel as far as I know, and I wasn't sure what he could do with previously developed characters. I reread *Jumper* before reading *Reflex* and my fears on the first count were wrong. *Reflex* is a clear, direct descendent of *Jumper*. Unfortunately that turned out to be a problem because in many respects *Reflex* is *Jumper*, *Once More* and not *Jumper, the Next Story*.

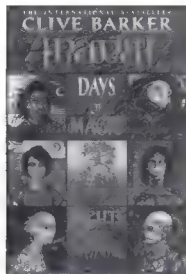
When the book opens, Davy has been married to Millie, first seen in *Jumper*, for ten years. He appears to have spent the last decade seeking personal stasis, using his talent to make a steady living with the NSA, while refusing to commit to having children with Millie. What keeps the book from being about an extended argument between Millie and Davy and their divorce is that very early on Davy is kidnapped by a malevolent group who would like very much to make Davy work for them, who have some concrete ideas about how to make this happen. Davy finds himself in a nightmare, made worse by the fact that he knows he left Millie trapped in their isolated home. Rather conveniently, Millie discovers she has somehow picked up Davy's knack for relocation. This allows her to survive and the pair to work independently to free Davy.

In many ways, this book is the mirror image of *Disappearing Act*. I can point out many things Gould does well. He does a nice (if clichéd) sneering evil businessman and well crafted minions who sold their souls for a job. Both Davy and Millie show creativity dealing with their situations. I did wonder why Davy previously failed to try some of the things he does in this book but he's conservative. My problem with this book is that I've seen the same basic plot (bad people want a talented guy to work for them or else) in *Jumper*. A variation (bad people want a group with something valuable to hand it over) showed up in *Wildlife*. There is a difference in that in both *Jumper* and *Wildlife* the antagonists were working for the US government whereas in *Reflex* they seem to own it. This might be more important for other people than it is for me. I can't deny that I couldn't put the book down once I picked it up but I really wanted there to be more to the story than a re-worked *Jumper*, however skillfully written.

James Davis Nicoll

Abarat: Days of Magic, Nights of War Clive Barker

Cotler/HarperCollins illustrated hb, 493pp, \$24.99/£20



It's the impurities within a work that can truly bring it to life. And those impurities themselves can take on a greater life for the contrast they find. Clive Barker's latest novel, *Abarat: Days of*

Magic, Nights of War provides an excellent example of the power of impurity. Here, it's the darkness running through Barker's rainbow narrative that gives it power, and the horror within that makes the spark of life burn so brightly in this fantasy. Almost incidentally, it's also some of the best horror that Barker has yet created, even – perhaps especially – when readers realize that it harkens back to imagery found in his earliest work.

Like its predecessor, *Days of Magic, Nights of War* is remarkably easy to read, without seeming compromised in any way whatsoever. I have to admit that I was skeptical. No doubt the paintings help relieve some of the weight, but it's also without doubt that Barker has become a remarkably talented writer. He leavens the story with humor, with high imagination and characters the reader absolutely loves, from Candy Quackenbush to the despicable Mater Motley.

At the heart of this novel is a wonderfully tortured soul, Christopher Carrion, who is capable of great evil. In an early set piece, we find Carrion hatching monsters the likes of which we haven't seen since the very first story in *The Midnight Meat Train*. What's interesting is that in this scene, and other scenes of horror and wonder, Barker achieves the same level of disturbing, visionary power that he achieved in his much-more adult-oriented fiction without any of the adults-only trappings. The darkness in Barker is not lost when you remove the explicit sexual nature of his earlier works. Indeed, in some places this novel is actually rather darker than his full-bore horror, and that's surely down to the contrasts that the richly imagined world of Abarat provides.

Barker makes a wise decision to return to Chickentown, Candy's home in our world. The mundane nature of suburban Middle America and its inhabitants comes as a refreshing tonic to the ever-exotic Abarat. With nine-headed this and two-headed that, a few levelheaded suburbanites and

It's the darkness running through Barker's rainbow narrative that gives it power, and the horror within that makes the spark of life burn so brightly in this fantasy



hardheaded pragmatists manage to seem positively glamorous. In fact, they help to buttress the glamour that Barker himself is creating with this elaborate fantasy.

Barker deftly avoids one of the main traps of serial fantasy by providing a narrative that offers a sense of closure and completeness while managing to leave things clearly unfinished. The end of this novel then, leaves the reader with the same feeling of satisfying impurities that the mixed genres do. Some aspects of the narrative are nicely rounded out, so much so that although the series is clearly incomplete, the novel itself feels quite complete. Candy's journey is clearly not over, but the novel does not end on a cliffhanger. Like Candy, readers will feel at home, welcome. Ready to explore further into the dark heart of Barker's complex creation.

The Healthy Dead Steven Erikson

PS Publishing, 103pp, £25

Steven Erikson has created the world of his Malazan Empire so thoroughly, so completely, that he can write a series of light-hearted satiric adventures set in it that have the same impact they might have had had they been set in the real world. *The Healthy Dead* is a sequel to the wildly popular *Blood Follows*, and once again our heroes Bauchelain, Korbal Broach and Emancipor Reese are on hand to stir up trouble. Having made a hasty exit from the scene of their last little escapade, they find themselves outside the city of Quaint. It is anything *but* before their arrival, and it will certainly be much less so after.

The problem is that Quaint has become so good under the tutelage of King Macroctus the Overwhelmingly Considerate that the fabric of civilization itself is threatened. It will come as no surprise that in order to save civilization, Bauchelain, Broach and Reese will have to destroy it. The vices personified are withering away in an alley. Lust, Envy, Greed and their friends are about to starve to death. But under the Overwhelmingly Considerate kingship of Macroctus, life itself is about to starve to death. It's not hard for Reese and his demonic and sorcerous allies to tilt the balance. But it's great fun for the reader, unless you are one of the 'lifestyle fascists' that Erikson warns not to read this.

What follows is a series of escalating scenes of antic satire and awesome grotesquerie. In the space of less than a hundred pages – a couple of hours of reading – Erikson manages an incisive parody of our own health-oriented culture while creating another in an imaginative fantasy. No reader can experience these pages without feeling the full force of the entire series looming in the background, lending matter a depth and precision that's far beyond what is achieved in a 500-page novel.

Erikson's characters and dialogue are delightful. His creatures have an organic, in-your-face feel. They're not gross or disgusting, just sweatily real. His humans also have that sweaty, slightly unpleasant reality about them. You can almost smell them.

And you'll want to smell them again. Erikson does exactly what every writer strives to do. In *The Healthy Dead*, he leaves you wanting more. Though he leaves you wanting less overwhelming consideration, to be sure. »

Angel Stations

Gary Gibson

Tor UK, 392pp. £10.99



Sure, we all start with the stone tablets. Then there are the burning bushes, the innumerable books, and who knows what lies in the future? Gods undergo the same kind of technological upgrades as anything

else, Gary Gibson suggests in his first novel *Angel Stations*. Gibson imbues his high-flying space opera with a combination of grit and a three-dimensional vision not common enough in the burgeoning world of space adventures. But his novel unfolds with a peculiar and ultimately winning strategy. Written as a fast-paced tale of humanity loose among the stars, *Angel Stations* nonetheless gives up its secrets slowly, deliberately. Well past the point where readers expect to know all the ground rules and be immersed in a tense chase towards the conclusion, Gibson is still doling out content from his stone tablets. We're propelled forward not only by our desire to know what will happen. We want to find out exactly what has happened and is happening.

As the novel opens, humanity has long ago discovered the remains of an ancient civilization that spread throughout the galaxy. Called 'Angels' by their discoverers, they left a network of fully functional space stations behind, each built around a singularity that enables instantaneous travel from one to the other. Humanity has spread throughout the galaxy using this technology, and discovered only one other civilization, the lupine inhabitants of Kaspar, still in the medieval stages of development. Elias is a dealer in information and stolen technology. He's been modified by experiments with Angel-modified DNA. He has visions of ghosts, and powers he barely comprehends. Kim is a pilot who once led an expedition into the Angel complex on Kaspar, but it ended in disgrace. She consumes the memories of her deceased lover with the aid of Angel technology. Ursu is a priest-acolyte in the city of Nubala. He's been granted a vision by his god Shecumpeh. But his god has asked him to perform a task that itself is the highest heresy.

These characters form the core of *Angel Stations*, but Gibson adds many more. They're all quite clearly delineated, presented and conceived, no matter how

small the part they play. And though humanity has thrived enough to spread out across the galaxy – with the help of Angel technology – it hasn't gotten beyond leaving individual humans in circumstances that break their hearts and their minds. Gibson's characters all seem particularly human even to his present-day readers. He offers a number of nice touches to complicate matters in a pleasantly unpleasant fashion.

Angel Stations is dense and involving, puzzling and perplexing. It's unabashed science fiction, with an almost 'Golden Age' feel to it, but a very modern density, the culture-shock that makes science fiction so enjoyable. It does require a soupçon of patience, but that patience is rewarded with surprise after surprise including sympathy for and understanding of the large cast of characters, not all of them human. Yes, Gibson does ignore advice from the original stone tablets handed down by the publishing deities. Readers will feel themselves fortunate to reap the rewards of Gibson's acts of literary heresy.

Nightingale's Lament

Simon R. Green

Ace Fantasy, 217pp. \$6.50

In the dark heart of London, where it's always 3AM and gods and monsters stroll alongside the humans, John Taylor is once again up to good that at first bears a singular appearance to no good. As *Nightingale's Lament* begins, he's trying to find out how Prometheus Power has come to grab a big chunk of the NightSide's power market. His search ends lamentably, but it's not the only lament he's going to hear. Hiding out from The Authorities afterwards, he's contacted by Charles Chabron, 'large as life and twice as French'. Chabron hires Taylor to find his daughter, Rossingnol, who is under the sway of the Cavendishes, a sinister pair of promoters who have her billed as the latest singing sensation. The trouble is, she only sings sad songs, and those who hear them are prone to end their lives.

Nightingale's Lament offers all the pleasures of the previous NightSide novels while still seeming fresh. Green's prose is consistently funny, and protagonist John Taylor tries to be bad enough to keep him from seeming too good. He pops off a number of memorable one-liners, and his patter is consistently entertaining. The NightSide is entertainingly explored, and Green creates several scenes of horrifically

imaginative awe. Green is a remarkably effective writer, and his work here is exemplary. In the midst of a seemingly breezy narrative, he'll casually unleash a detailed, inspired description of soul-searing terror. He provides some entertaining science fictional improvisations that give the novel a nice varied texture.

Green's characterization deserves praise as well as his prose. Rather than relying on the sidekicks from his previous novels, he creates a couple of entertaining new characters, Julien the newspaper editor and Dead Boy. Between the two of them, readers get a few laughs, some memorable grue and buckets of blood. Green is ruthlessly economical. He makes every word count and even manages to end things with an almost poetic, wistful note.

The novel barely gets past novella length, but that's all for the best. Simon R. Green is a man who knows what works and delivers that, only that and not a single word more, resulting in a perfectly satisfying lightweight reading experience.

The Atrocity Archives

Charles Stross

Golden Gryphon hb. 274pp. \$24.95



The Atrocity Archives sounds pretty gruesome, but it's not the horror show the title suggests. It includes the short novel 'The Atrocity Archive', originally serialized in *Spectrum SF*, an additional brand-

new novella ('The Concrete Jungle'), an introduction by Ken Macleod ('Charlie's Demons'), an afterword by Charles Stross ('Inside the Fear Factory') and a multi-page 'Glossary of Abbreviations, Acronyms and Organizations'. The book does live up to the plurality of its title. But 'The Atrocity Archives' turn out to be more fun than the grim moniker might suggest.

In 'The Atrocity Archive', Bob Howard is the prototypical desk-jockey who just wants a shot at active duty. Up until recently, he was the Laundry's tech guy. This Laundry doesn't whitewash clothes; it cleanses reality itself, of those pesky demons and Lovecraftian entities that try to break through into everyday life, using the specialized math that collapses the barriers between parallel universes. Bob's first job has him clambering around piles of floppy disks and reformatting hard drives. His next job sends him to California

to interview a British scientist working in the States who may have stumbled on to some of those hazardous equations.

'The Concrete Jungle' finds Bob assigned to a case that appears at first glance to be an obscure prank. But as he goes through a series of very cleverly told stories found in (what did you expect?) the archives, he finds there's quite literally much more than meets the eye. Starting out in the Greek myths and ending up in the computerized surveillance of the twenty-first century, 'The Concrete Jungle' kicks bureaucratic butt with a ripping yarn of spy tradecraft and top-notch hacking.

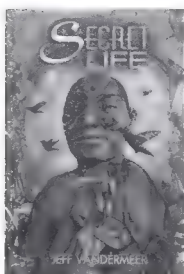
In his entertaining afterword, Stross talks about the two poles between which this electrical storm of language arcs. On one hand, he claims that he's rewriting Len Deighton as if Cold War spy tales were existential horror. And on the other hand, he claims that he's rewriting Lovecraft as if Lovecraft's extra-dimensional terrors were nothing more than accurate intelligence. In reality, Stross is a true original, and what holds this Rube-Goldberg concoction together is his lively, humorous prose.

Buttressing the comedic monologue are high-quality, deep-thought science fictional conceptualizations. 'The Atrocity Archive' and 'The Concrete Jungle' are thick with intellectual riffs. Golden Gryphon have put all this in a lovely package that's built to last. Readers who have encountered Stross in *Singularity Sky* will find a similar sensibility at work here in an entirely different arena. The humor and the voice remain the same. But the literary intent and background are delightfully different. It leaves the reader looking forward to more and different fictions and forms from the same smart voice.

Secret Life

Jeff Vandermeer

Golden Gryphon, 306pp, \$24.95



Afterimages, burnt into your mind, phrases and imagery curled on the floor. This is the heritage of *Secret Life*, a collection of short fiction by Jeff Vandermeer. Vandermeer burns brightly, even when his subject matter is dark as night. This collection offers an astonishing variety of subject matter and styles. But most importantly, it offers intensity. These are glimpses of the sun that flicker long after

the vision afforded by reading them.

Readers familiar with Vandermeer's oeuvre will enjoy his visits to familiar fictional locales. He returns to Ambergris, the setting for *City of Saints and Madmen*, in five of the stories collected here. Readers can't help but be struck by how confidently, how seamlessly he segues from a world that seems familiar into a world of fantasy. He does so in a variety of voices, from the matter-of-fact narrative voice of 'Learning to Leave the Flesh' to the surreal tones of 'Corpse Mouth and Spore Nose' to the meta-fiction of 'Exhibit H'.

In 'Detectives and Cadavers' and 'Balzac's War', Vandermeer extends the terrain of the science fictional setting for *Veniss Underground*. 'Balzac's War' is a complex but compact novella of a war between humanity and its literally faceless, soulless creations. On the other hand, 'The Sea, Mendeho and Moonlight' is a poignant tale of loss and love, a myth from the future Vandermeer has created.

The majority of the stories here are not connected to Vandermeer's signature works. In them the reader will find a variety that is shocking and bracing. The title story, written in shimmering glimpses, tells the story of a building that has a life of its own. Vandermeer slides easily from a surreal vision of corporate life that has become so ingrown it's mutated into the disquieting thoughts of those who work there. The world we think we know becomes an example of why we can never know, never trust this world or any other. 'The Festival of the Freshwater Squid', which edges into Ambergris territory, is nonetheless set in a very real Florida. This is a perfect example of Vandermeer's best work. It's full of a rigorous whimsy as it gorgeously renders in prose the entirely fictional habits of an entirely fictional species, culminating in an image of loveliness and power. It's a particularly striking example of science fiction, remarkable and imaginative.

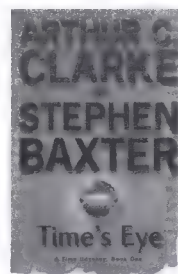
Vandermeer's prose – no matter what style he's working in – is intensely literary. But then, these stories don't feel as if they are literary fiction in the midst of the reading experience. Vandermeer's fiction leads a mayfly life: each story bursts into life then flickers back into nothingness, leaving only itself. Leaving only the reader, the book in hand. You can close the book. But the stories remain alive, the words follow one another and lead back to one another. For a few moments you are there. You are there forever.

Rick Kleffel

Time's Eye

Arthur C. Clarke & Stephen Baxter

Gollancz hb, 263pp, £12.99



An Authors' Note at the start gives most of the game away. This is Book One of 'A Time Odyssey' which, say Clarke and Baxter, 'neither follows or precedes the books of the earlier *Odyssey*, but is at right angles to

them . . . taking similar premises in a different direction'. After a brief pause for context, one realises that they don't mean Homer's *Odyssey*, but Clarke's sequence of novels beginning with *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Within a few chapters, we're introduced to a prehistoric ape-woman, a helicopter crew from 2037, and a party of British journalists from 1885, including a young Rudyard Kipling. All have fallen into 'the Discontinuity', a time distortion that places them on an alternate-world Earth. This planet is carved up into a patchwork of landscapes from different historical periods also inhabited by the armies of Alexander the Great and Genghis Khan. The whole is watched over by metal spheres or eyes who, we guess, are sentinels installed by some transcendent alien race and set to act as alarm clocks/teleports/plot enablers soon enough.

Most of the novel, however, is spent moving the various historical pieces around this chessboard of a world. There's some local colour, and battles, and the sense that we're being subjected to the results of rather too much research for the story's good. The book is a smooth read though, and, about forty pages from the end, it bootstraps itself into business. Some characters start asking questions about the nature and purpose of the eyes and, in true science-fictional fashion, rationality leads to answers that move events forward. A late chapter carries the Clarke cadence of old: 'The long wait was ending. On yet another world, intelligence had been born and was escaping from its planetary cradle'. But just as these broader perspectives start to open, the book ends and we're left waiting for a sequel or two. So *Time's Eye* is almost all prologue, and despite its readability is for most of its length one of the least urgent books I can remember. The next volumes may knit this picaresque tour into a tighter framework, but it's not yet clear why this is a story that desperately needs to be told.

Graham Sleight

ANDY HEDGECOCK

INTERVIEW : KEN MACLEOD

BLADES AND BROKEN BOTTLES

**Writing in the Guardian a couple of years ago, Colin**

Greenland identified inclusivity as a key characteristic of Ken MacLeod's work. Few writers, he suggested, have openly drawn on such a wide range of influences. The expansive nature of MacLeod's imaginings and frank enthusiasm for historical and contemporary peers has led, inevitably, to a smorgasbord of critical comparisons.

A roll call of luminaries including Iain Banks, Kim Stanley Robinson, William Gibson and H.G. Wells has been drawn up to highlight the range of his concerns, his visionary energy, his ironic wit and his knack for melding political speculation with scientific contemplation.

But, in terms of MacLeod's philosophies, positive view of humanity and his approach to political analysis, all absolutely crucial to the appeal of his books, there's a more obvious correspondence – with the nineteenth century American writer, philosopher, poet and essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson. Like Emerson, MacLeod is a doughty opponent of warmongering conservatism, the 'practical lies' of government founded on coercion and the programmatic designs for living of authoritarian 'progressives'. Emerson's best known quotation is: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do."

When I ask MacLeod about his political beliefs and his reaction to recent world events, his response is utterly devoid of the hobgoblins of unexamined assumptions and off the peg 'party line' thinking.

"On a political level, I've tried to highlight the common enemy of libertarians and socialists, and of others, whether you call it the New World Order or imperialism. I don't get angry about the big issues or global injustices – there's no point – but I do get angry about policies that treat adults as children: censorship, the anti-smoking campaign, drug prohibition, gun control. My angriest responses are those of a conservative curmudgeon. But for serious left-wing matters I try to use the blade rather than the broken bottle."

Admirers of MacLeod's stories won't be surprised in the slightest by the

"AS A GENRE SF HAS BORDERLINE ASPERGER'S"

collision of apparently contradictory ideas: wry and provocative, they exhibit a striking relish of ambiguity and thorough appreciation of complexity – scientific, philosophical, social and psychological. Writing for the Amazon website, Roz Kaveney asserted "MacLeod's real gift is his capacity to see all sides of a question, even when he is sure of the answer."

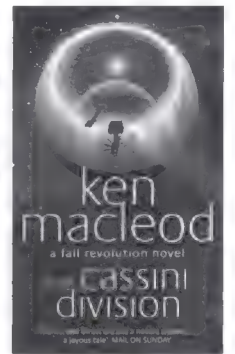
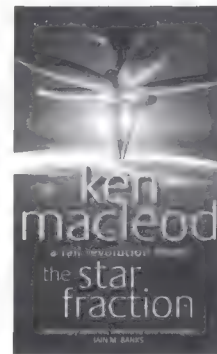
And MacLeod's gift is applied every bit as assiduously in his criticism of the form in which he's made his name as a writer.

"As a genre sf has borderline Asperger's. Certainly mainstream fiction and some fantasy has moved me more deeply than sf. sf is at one level a literature of alienation, and I was an alienated adolescent, that's what drew me to it. There's nothing wrong with that in a world that is changing fast. In Orwell's delightfully titled essay 'Wells, Hitler, and the World State' he describes the exhilaration of discovering this marvellous chap who knew that the future won't be what respectable people – parents, teachers, clergymen – tell you it's going to be."

Ken MacLeod was born in 1954, in Stornoway, on the Isle of Lewis – one of the Western Isles of Scotland – where he lived until moving to the industrial town of Greenock at the age of ten. After a comparatively conservative and strongly religious upbringing, he took a degree in Zoology at Glasgow University, later moving to London for postgraduate research in biomechanics. In the meantime, he began to explore radical political ideas, becoming an active Trotskyist, and eventually joining the British Communist Party. I suggest this series of transitions – rural to urban, conservatism to radicalism, faith to rationalism – are at the heart of his love of complexity, plurality and paradox. The central concern of his Fall Revolution quartet – *The Star Fraction* (1995), *The Stone Canal* (1996), *The Cassini Division* (1998) and *The Sky Road* (1999) – is the struggle of competing political models and conflicting economic systems to reach a *modus vivendi*. Is that theme rooted in his personal psychological journey?

"Very deeply, I should imagine. On the other hand it's so typically Scottish that duality is a cliché of the national character. You can reject the past and its influences, or you can try to integrate what's valid in them, and I prefer to do that. For example, many years ago when I first got interested in Marxism I came across Christopher Hill's little book *The English Revolution 1640*, and I began to see how the Covenanter martyrs, Cromwell and King Billy – all of them, you know, much respected in my upbringing in the Presbyterian tradition – could be seen as revolutionary ancestors; that you could, metaphorically at least, carry their banners on the same long march as Winstanley, William Blake, Tom Paine,

in really trying to integrate them, to bring together Marx and Mises so to speak, but I would need to do a lot more reading and thinking before I could say he has succeeded. What I've tried to do is treat both traditions with respect. Anarcho-capitalism is such a fantastic science fiction idea generator that I'm surprised it isn't more widely used in sf, though of course libertarian themes are popular. What I did that was original was to apply this American idiom to a British or European background. I've used Marxism in a similar way: exploited it, you might say. The materialist conception of history – the idea of a succession of societies which makes our future 'socialism or barbarism' – runs through the Fall



James Connolly and John Maclean. More recently, *Discovering the Scottish Revolution* by Neil Davidson both amended and affirmed that sense of connection."

These days MacLeod's political affiliations have shifted from the Marxist end of the radical spectrum to a brand of libertarianism rooted in the ideals of co-operation, anti-corporatism and opposition to war that originally drew him to the left. I ask if he's been able to integrate classic libertarian and Marxist thinking, and whether this is reflected in the setting of his first novel, *The Star Fraction*, a Balkanised 21st Century Britain, with mini-states organised according to the principles of radically different ideologies.

"No, because I don't think I've in any way integrated them. The anarchist Kevin Carson has done a lot of impressive work

The central concern of his Fall Revolution quartet – *The Star Fraction* (1995), *The Stone Canal* (1996), *The Cassini Division* (1998) and *The Sky Road* (1999) – is the struggle of competing political models and conflicting economic systems to reach a *modus vivendi*

Revolution books, as does a famously tricky problem within that conception, that of 'the role of the individual in history'."

An abstract idea and a concrete image

It will be evident by now that MacLeod's thinking, and his books, are mired in political philosophy. This applies to the Engines of Light trilogy – *Cosmonaut Keep* (2000), *Dark Light* (2001) and *Engine City* (2002) – as much as the Fall Revolution books. But eschews proselytising and crams his stories with caustic humour. I ask if he's deliberately nudging his readers towards challenging ideas, or even setting up complex thought experiments to test the validity of his own philosophies.

"No, it's not quite like either. What I'm doing much of the time is exploring what to me are new ideas. Libertarianism was a new and shiny idea to me when I started writing *The Star Fraction*. Similarly, when I wrote *Cosmonaut Keep* I was intrigued by a sort of left-wing version of the 'Peak Oil' theory, which was worked out by the late Mark Jones – a British communist who had seen the Russian counter-revolution at first hand. I shoved in some other neo-communist ideas about computerising economic planning from Paul Cockshott and Alan Cotterell. I read *The Dreamland Chronicles* and the Groom Lake Desert Rat website for the Area 51 stuff, and re-read Lucretius for the materialist religion.

"The ideas about gender in *Dark Light* – that, to put it crudely, masculinity is all about what Engels called 'armed bodies of men' – I took from the gay Marxist David Fernbach's *The Spiral Path*, along with bits and pieces of anthropology for the Sky People. And so on. The book I'm working on right now, *Learning the World*, comes out of reading Buckle's *History of Civilization in England* and Winwood Reade's *The Martyrdom of Man* – Victorian stuff that's new and exciting to me.

"Having said that, I'm always gratified and almost surprised to hear from people who have been introduced to new ideas through my books, and have gone off to explore them further. I recently met a libertarian socialist in the Scottish Socialist Party who has used *The Cassini Division* to explain and spread some ideas about a pluralist socialism."

I'm intrigued by the apparent contractions in MacLeod's intentions as an author. So when he's planning a new story what constitutes his primary focus,

scientific, philosophical and socio-political speculation, or the desire to entertain?

"The former. It usually begins with an abstract idea and a concrete image. *Learning the World* began with: 'Wouldn't it be interesting if the Victorian positivist historians were right, and people became more rational and more liberal as they acquired more knowledge? And wouldn't it be cool to write something as if coming straight from the positivist-influenced British sf or scientific romance tradition of Wells, Stapledon, and Clarke, as if the New Wave and cyberpunk had never happened?' That was the abstract idea. The concrete image was of a big vulnerable peaceful colony ship of rational liberal far-future humans slamming into a solar system of aliens who have just entered their version of the twentieth century, and are therefore tooling up for a rumble with *somebody*. From there, the elements of entertainment arise from the thoughts that well up and make me smile."

MacLeod's books present an essentially optimistic view of human nature and human possibility – an idea set out with great conviction in *The Stone Canal*. Is he convinced the notion of historical progress remains valid? And, if so, to what extent is this rooted in his background as a scientist and former role as a communist activist?

"I've always had this view, since long before I was a scientist or a communist. That was one of the things I remember from the sixties: a sense that there were huge problems in the world, but that they could be overcome. You could actually see progress happening."

But there's a dark edge to MacLeod's speculation too. I ask if there are particular social, political or cultural events that have led him to reassess his writing and the concerns it tackles.

"Russia's recovery, fragile though it is, contradicts the implied future of the 'Former Union' in the Fall Revolution books. 9/11 and the War on Terror destroyed the US/UN sole superpower. We are still in the age of wars and revolutions, and this really, really pisses me off. In 2002 I was a guest at a Polish convention, and wandered around the old Jewish Quarter of Krakow, and while it's gratifying and moving to see it becoming the *new* Jewish Quarter, I became haunted by a premonition that something really bad is going to happen. Not there particularly, but to all of us. That went into *Newton's Wake*."

Understanding the world and loving it

My academic background is similar to MacLeod's – we studied related subjects at the same University – but the experience developed in me a mild form of neo-luddism. So, in my case the technologies MacLeod has re-imagined in his novels elicit a sense of apprehension leavened with anticipation. I ask if he's at all concerned with the deleterious effect our tools are having on the way we live and relate to each other?

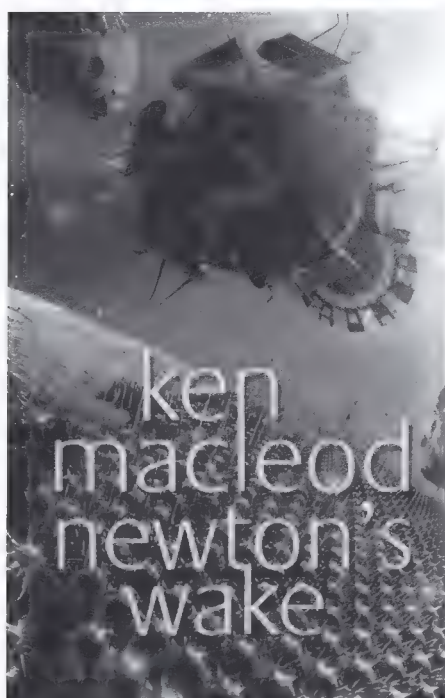
"For me it's the other way around – anticipation leavened by apprehension. I hope we do get life-extension on the NHS by 2014. If I'm alive then I'll bloody well need it. About the tools: well, to be honest I don't see much of these supposed effects. I've never been into technological determinism or futurism: from McLuhan through Toffler to the Internet evangelists, I've read useful insights mixed up with a lot of hype. It may be that people's forms of self-expression have changed with the Internet and the mobile phone, but not



It will be evident by now that MacLeod's thinking, and his books, are mired in political philosophy.

This applies to the Engines of Light trilogy – *Cosmonaut Keep* (2000), *Dark Light* (2001) and *Engine City* (2002) – as much as the Fall Revolution books

"I became haunted by a premonition that something really bad is going to happen. Not there particularly, but to all of us. That went into *Newton's Wake*"



their basic identities. The possibility of creating a virtual identity has been there since the invention of writing, and has been used to create the known personalities of Socrates, Jesus and Dr Johnson – to use C.S. Lewis's examples."

In the *Cassini Division*, MacLeod proposes a brand of Artificial Intelligence that moves away from the well-worn cliché of the trammelled, emotionless thinking of the synthetic mind. So to what extent is he convinced by the notion that the human spirit can transcend its 'meat machine' in the next hundred years or so?

"I'm utterly unconvinced. I use the Strong AI hypothesis – which is the basis, it seems to me, of the whole notion of uploading the mind into a machine – like I might use faster-than-light travel: as a plot device. I don't believe it for a minute."

The *Engines of Light* books marked a shift of direction for MacLeod, a revival and extension of the traditional Space Opera. They also constituted a fresh take on the well-worn notion of alien intervention. What led him to attempt to revivify these 'traditional' forms and tropes?

"It was an attempt to move away from the near-future, left-libertarian focus of the *Fall Revolution* books, and perhaps to reach a wider audience. Artistically it was a sort of repayment of my debt to Golden Age sf, such as the romantic image of a fisherman walking on to a starship at the beginning of Alan E. Nourse's *Rocket to Limbo*. There was also the sheer fun of the idea of trying to come up with a rational explanation of little grey humanoid aliens and gigantic cigar-shaped motherships and most of the rest of the UFO mythos. What I really wanted to do was set up a series environment, but it turned out to be a trilogy. Such is life, sometimes!"

MacLeod has often expressed admiration for the contribution of William Gibson to the resurgence of sf in the early 1980s. Does he feel the genre still has its finger on the pulse of the key technological and socio-political changes we're about to go through? Or is another paradigm shift long overdue?

"The new paradigm is the Vingean Singularity, the notion of a time up ahead where machine intelligence supersedes human intelligence, or where human intelligence becomes multiplied, to the point where you get a fast, steep ascent into a posthuman realm. I've used it myself, more as a piece of backstory than as a main plot, but people like Charles Stross and Cory Doctorow have begun to explore it thoroughly, as of course has Vernor Vinge himself. I've said elsewhere that the Singularity is just a secular version of millenarianism, and that may still be true, but it remains an immensely fertile metaphor for our time.

"I'm not fully up to speed on current sf, so I may be missing something. The latest big thing is the New Space Opera. This is an interesting phenomenon to which I've made my own contribution, but I'm not sure what it tells us about how sf relates to the present. No doubt it'll all seem obvious in retrospect. Another new development is sf writers dealing with the near future – or near-future issues – in technothriller mode, such as Paul McAuley's *Whole Wide World*, *The Secret of Life*, and *White Devils*, or Greg Bear's *Darwin's Radio*; or in satirical mode, as in Richard Morgan's *Market Forces*. Now this is an astute move,

because mainstream writers have been doing both sorts of things – Michael Crichton's books, Douglas Copeland's *Infinite Jest* – and arguably not doing it as well as they could by bringing to bear the sf writer's bag of tricks. The themes and issues so far are those raised by the final frontier of commodification, which isn't asteroid minerals but information – both genetic and cultural. The next big thing, I suspect, will be how all this plays itself out under the new shadows of the so-called War on Terrorism and climate change. We might see new catastrophe novels. My guess is that a lot of dust is being blown off old copies of the works of John Wyndham, John Christopher, J.G. Ballard, and John Brunner. The war in Iraq could have been scripted by Ballard – it's even closer to his abiding obsessions than the war in Vietnam. In his writing about Vietnam pornography was a *metaphor*; in Iraq, it's an interrogation technique. Likewise with the media landscape.

"The war has been the defining event of this government. Now although I took an active part in the anti-war movement, handing out leaflets, going on demos and so on, I came to feel that one motivation for such activity was quite simply to keep oneself sane. You have a televised war, taking place in a Ballardian media landscape of Orwellian distortion, and you counterpose to it an essentially symbolic witnessing. 'Not in my name' is a feeble slogan. There was nothing threatening about the anti-war movement."

I end our discussion by asking MacLeod if he accepts the idea his work is, in essence, a plea for the integration of rational optimism and romantic scepticism.

"That's close to how I feel and what comes across in my books. Take, for example, the end of the penultimate chapter of *The Star Fraction*: 'Stars and stripes and hammers and sickles flaunted their fading colours to the real stars that held no promises, only hopes and endless, endless lands.' Now that's romantic, and sceptical! I know exactly what passage in mainstream literature inspired that: the final paragraphs of Alan Sharp's *A Green Tree in Gedde*. Understanding the world and loving it aren't in conflict, even and especially if we understand, to crib from Spinoza, the world can't love us back."

Newton's Wake is available in hardback from Orbit (369pp. £17.99), who will also be publishing *The New Intelligence* in August 2005. Ken MacLeod's provocative and entertaining blog site is at <http://kenmacleod.blogspot.com>

MICHAEL J. JASPER

REDEMPTION,

Drawing Near

There were armed soldiers in Father Joshua's church again.

As he went through the familiar, almost unconscious movements of the morning Mass, Joshua McDowell did his best to ignore them. The four soldiers were nearly invisible anyway, thanks to their nano-fiber camouflage fatigues. Taking a deep breath, Joshua continued with that day's reading: "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come. Look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."

As if on cue, the lead soldier stepped forward out of the shadows in front of the security arch, her black pulse gun the same color as the hull of the ships that came crashing to Earth barely a month earlier.

Joshua hoped the soldiers hadn't come for him.

At the end of Mass, he watched the slow departure of his meager congregation, the same dozen elderly men and women he saw daily, all of them lifelong Chicago residents. In January, this Mass would have been packed with parishioners. But that was before the ships, the riots, and the bands of cultists.

Joshua shed his robes as soon as he was back in the rectory. His hands shaking, he arranged his gray hair in an attempt to hide his bald spot, feeling his fifty-eight years mostly inside his chest. His heart attack had been less than three months ago, and the now-familiar ache worsened on cold days.

"They don't know about the colonel," he told his reflection. "If they did, they would've taken you in right away. Have faith, McDowell."

Picking up his Bible, Joshua returned to the church. His shoes echoed down the main aisle and kicked up dust lit by the stained-glass windows reinforced with safety glass. A bittersweet mix of ozone and gun oil filled the air at the back of the church.

"So," he said to the young woman standing in the alcove, after a glance at her name tag, "Sergeant Murphy. What brings you here? It's not every church that has an armed guard, you know."

The female soldier looked at Joshua from behind a pair of wide, gray-lensed glasses. Above the three stripes affixed to her helmet was a blue badge decorated with an old-fashioned rifle and a silver wreath. By the time Joshua looked back at her face, her glasses had turned transparent. Light blue eyes now looked out at him, slightly magnified.

"We've gotten more reports about some recent sightings of . . . ah, undesirable groups in the area, sir. Anti-military protesters, possible new-religion types, and the like."

Joshua stifled a bitter smile at the soldier's description of the cults. Calling what they practiced a new religion was as close to a slap in the face to his work as a person could get without raising a hand.

"With the criminal activity that's taken place here recently, we were ordered to check in on you. Just trying to prevent a repeat of things like the fire from down the street. It's not every street that's had such a run of bad luck as yours," the soldier added.

Joshua winced at the memory of the firebombing of the apartment complex down the street from the church, followed by the riots only a few weeks ago that had resulted in the destruction of the church's organ and the installation of the new security system. The police and the soldiers with their pulse guns had arrived just in time that night, stopping the band of wild-eyed cultists on their way to the altar.

"Sorry," Sergeant Murphy said a moment later. "That came out wrong, sir."

Joshua nodded, looking away from her at the white metal of the security arch in front of the outer door. The soldiers had turned it off, silencing its low hum. The soldier moved closer and put two fingers in front of the tiny mike attached to her cheek.

"World's been different since January, sir," she whispered. "Everything's changed. We gotta stick together, y'know?"

Joshua looked at the female soldier with her black cheek mike and ear buds, her tiny blue forehead sensors, her color-shifting camouflage uniform, her blue-black pulse rifle, and her gray glasses.



"Yes," he said after Sergeant Murphy had removed her hand from her mike. "The world has changed. Too much."

"We'd best be going, sir. Unless you have anything suspicious to report?"

Shaking his head, Father Joshua forced a smile her way. He wondered how hard it would have been for Sergeant Murphy to call him 'Father'.

"Okay, then, Mister McDowell. Be careful."

The four of them turned and walked through the security arch without a sound. Joshua stepped through the arch himself and grabbed the outer door.

"Thanks," he called as a blast of cold air peppered with snow slammed into him. After pulling the door closed, Joshua activated the security arch again. Even through the thick doors and walls of his hundred-year-old church, he could hear the distant whine of a siren, accompanied by what sounded like the rattle of gunfire.

Father Joshua closed his eyes and prayed that his meeting this afternoon would somehow begin the process of recovering the peace his church, his street, his city, and the rest of his world had lost. Contrary to what most cultists thought, it was a peace that had been lost long before the ships ever arrived.

On a train headed north, classical music swept over Joshua's body as the sensory nodes on his wrists responded to the symphony by Mahler. He stared out his window at the buildings blurring past him and tried not to think too much about his upcoming meeting with the colonel. Outside, the landscape of Chicago, like most cities its size, looked like a series of construction sites in reverse. If it wasn't a terrorist car bomb shattering a storefront, it was a militia-backed 'cleansing' fire of a Muslim prayer house. Every street showed the signs of some form of violence, like a missing tooth in a nervous, yellowed smile.

As if attempting to distract him from the dismal view outside the elevated train, the nodes filled Joshua's nose with the scent of mint, while his mouth tasted chilled champagne. He pulled his coat sleeves lower to cover the nodes, slightly ashamed of the gadgets he'd bought from a Netstream ad a year ago. His gaze returned to the streets of northeast Chicago.

It was a different world, he and the soldier had agreed, now that there were twenty-nine ships scattered across the plains like litter from outer space.

He gazed at the digital map superimposed on the back of the seat in front of him and worried about what the colonel had in store for him at the site. He kept wondering if he'd be able to talk to one of them, and what sort of beliefs they might have, if they had any at all. The colonel hadn't wanted to share any of that information with Joshua over the Netstream.

The small blinking dot of their train was moving steadily to the northeast, out of the city, the landscape opening up around him. The congested buildings gave way to squat two-story houses, stores, parking lots, and narrow roads, and the train picked up even more speed. Few of the buildings he was passing bore the scars of the urban warfare that had been plaguing his city for years. Joshua closed his eyes and let the sensory buds wash away all of his concerns about the colonel and the ships, if only for a short while.

Half an hour later, he was met at the Waukegan train station by a young soldier driving a boxy blue sedan with black-tinted windows. Private Petersheim was a thin white man of barely twenty years, with a spattering of acne peeking out on his cheeks from under his oversized, opaqued glasses.

"Sorry I'm late, padre," Petersheim said as he stepped out

of the car. He ran a pencil-shaped scanner over Joshua's ID card, and the scanner beeped once. With a wink, the soldier returned the ID and shook Joshua's hand.

"Not a problem," Joshua said on his way into the warmth of the sedan. He sank into the torn vinyl seat. "Are we ready?"

"Yep," the private said once he was behind the wheel. He handed Joshua a bundle of slick fabric from the seat between them. "If you would, sir – Father – put these on over your clothes, at least until we get you inside the site. You sort of stand out a bit right now, with your black duds and all."

Joshua ran his hand down the nano-fiber camouflage suit, smiling in spite of his own nervousness. The smart-fabric shimmered with his touch, trying to match the color of his hand from the brief contact. He was still grinning when slipped the suit on over his clothes.

"Okay then," Petersheim said. "Hold on, Father. We're running a bit late."

They blasted out of the train station and quickly left town. Joshua held onto the dashboard as they rocketed over washboard-like gravel roads and zipped through rural intersections without stopping. Short minutes later, Petersheim skidded the ten-cylinder sedan to a halt outside the fenced-off site of the fallen ship.

Joshua pried his hands from the dashboard and squinted through the black-tinted windshield. The bumper of the big car was less than two feet away from a man stretched across the road wearing a rubber *Creature from the Black Lagoon* mask with glowing red eyes, his thin arms crossed over his chest like a corpse at a wake. He wore a bath robe and ski boots. Three dozen other similarly dressed people carried banners that read FREE THEM NOW! OR LET THEM OUT OR LET US IN! or other such messages. The masked crowd pushed up to the sedan, all of them reaching the index fingers of their right hand toward the vehicle without touching it.

"One second," the private said, putting his hand to his cheek mike. He whispered something, and three helmeted soldiers wearing black body armor emerged from a gap in the chain-link gate. The first soldier pulled the Black Lagoon man out of the way, while the others used hand-held stunners to push back the silent, pointing crowd.

"ET freaks," Petersheim said, giving Joshua an incredulous smile. "Phone home, and all that, y'know, padre?"

"Unbelievable," Joshua said as they were let inside the razorwire-tipped fence surrounding the site. He wondered if the robed and booted protestors spent all their time outside the site waiting for something to happen, masks on and ready.

Joshua tried to get a glimpse of the ship, hidden under the biggest of the bubble-tents, but the tent was sealed up tightly.

"Father?"

Joshua gave a start when he felt someone touch him. He looked down and saw Petersheim's pale hand on his upper arm. The camouflage suit had turned a whitish-pink color around the spot where the private's skin touched it.

"Right this way, Father," the private said, aiming Joshua toward the tallest tent. "It's okay. Everything's safe. We've checked it all a million times."

They walked up to the wall of bubble-like plastic that rose up almost five stories high, like a circus tent. From inside the tent, voices shouted as if from a great distance.

Petersheim threw back the flap. "The colonel's in there."

Joshua nodded and forced his body into action. He took two steps inside into the antiseptic-smelling tent, and in doing so, Father Joshua McDowell became the first person not affiliated with the military to see a crashlanded Wannoshay ship up close.

His first reaction was to lean as far backwards as he could without falling so he could get a good look at the black ship.

Crumpled and broken in many places, the outer hull of the tall, angular ship was made up of a flat metal that didn't reflect any light. Lit by a ring of lights embedded in the ground, aiming upwards, the ship itself was at least fifty feet high, but it looked somehow fragile with its delicate lines. At first Joshua thought the ship was cubical in shape, but as his eyes adjusted, he could see more and more angles making up the exterior of the hull as he walked closer. The ship had at least six vertical faces that bent at the top to form a sort of peak. The unfamiliar angles of the dented ship made Joshua's eyes ache.

"Good Lord," he whispered. The depth of what he was doing suddenly hit him. He wondered what he'd gotten himself into when he agreed to the colonel's invitation.

As they walked closer, he could see grayish foam clustered around the many rents and tears in the hull, while power leads, cables, and thick wires of human design wrapped around the exterior like spider webs. Scaffolding encircled the perimeter of the octagonal ship, and eight crooked spires sprouted from the top of the ship. Most of the spires stretched out far enough to touch the plastic bubble-tent surrounding the ship. Men and women in dark green uniforms walked across the scaffolding, and their shouts died away when they saw Joshua.

Petersheim moved toward an open hatch just below the middle-most projection of the ship. The spires made Joshua think, for some reason, of the points on the crown of the Statue of Liberty.

As soon as he stepped inside the flat black metal walls of the ship, his breath was taken away by the cold. Instead of the institutional odor outside the ship, he could now smell something tangy and earthy, as if a handful of heavy-duty rock salt had been thrown into a fresh puddle of mud after a rain. The odor made the air of the ship feel too close.

Petersheim pulled out a hand light and popped it on. The light flickered red, and then glowed orange, illuminating an irregularly-shaped alcove and the doorways on either side of them.

"They're down there waiting for you, padre," the private said, pointing at the door on their left. "I'll take your camos, sir. They want you to meet him with your priest suit on, for full effect, I guess."

Joshua slipped off the camouflage coveralls with a pang of regret; he'd left his coat in the car, and he was enjoying the sensation of nano-fiber covering him, making him feel almost invisible. The private took the suit and handed him the light.

"I'm not authorized to go any further," Petersheim said. "Don't worry – you'll see better once your eyes adjust. The smell doesn't ever really go away, though. Good luck, Father."

Joshua thanked the private as the young man walked out of the ship. Inhaling the strange, loamy odor, he left the alcove and entered the cold hallway. After a walking for over a hundred feet, he turned into a room bathed in blue-gray light.

Inside the room was Colonel Cossa, along with three other armed people in uniform. The soldiers stood, weapons lowered, in a loose circle about ten feet away from a tall being wrapped in bandages. This fifth being was not a human.

The mummified being was leaning on a twisted piece of black metal, and the dull metal seemed to have been pulled up from the floor of the ship. The rest of the room was bare, just flat black walls, black floor, and black ceiling, all absorbing the light instead of reflecting it.

Not a human, Joshua thought again, looking at the being's too-short legs and the short, twitching cords on the being's

head that slipped out of their wrappings like snakes or fingers.

Colonel Cossa stepped forward with a smile. "Glad you could make it today, Father," he said, shaking Joshua's trembling hand. "We would've invited you here sooner, but the red tape was significant. Plus we had to keep you shielded from the media and other . . . elements."

"I think I know what you're talking about," Joshua said, thinking about the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* as he tried to smile. His lips stuck to his teeth, making him feel like he was grimacing, and he forced his lips together again.

The colonel nodded at that and turned to the creature leaning on the black metal structure. The long-armed, short-legged being was bouncing slightly, giving off the salty smell Joshua had smelled the instant he entered the ship. Salt, and something else, underneath that familiar odor.

"But now, at last," Cossa said, "I want you to meet the Wannoshay we've named Johndo, as in John-space-Doe."

Joshua nodded at the tall being whose face was almost hidden in bandages. Johndo's wrappings only covered the exposed skin of his face, hands, and feet. A grayish-white robe covered his torso. Joshua thought of the protestors – or were they cultists? – waiting outside once again, and then he thought of the bandaged lepers from the Bible. He wondered if the creature had been checked for all types of disease.

"Their skin is extremely susceptible to heat and sunlight," Cossa said. "The wrappings protect him from the air and sun while he adjusts to our environment. We've been supervising the work on drugs that will help him and the rest of the Wannoshay adapt."

Joshua felt a sudden urge to run from the black-walled ship, away from the soldiers and the tall alien – the Wannoshay – with its musky, salty smell.

"In any case," Cossa said, "Johndo has let us know that he and his, ah, people need to talk to someone affiliated with religion. He and some of the other have a decent grasp of English, now that the linguists have been working with them, but I guess they just distrust us, even our chaplains. Don't ask me why. We're hoping you can help."

Joshua tried to swallow. When it became obvious that all eyes on the room were trained on him, he cleared his throat. "How can I help?"

"Talk to him," the colonel said. "Get him to tell us all he can about his people. Why they're here. What they want. If more of them are coming."

Joshua nodded. "So where do we begin?"

Before the colonel could answer, Johndo straightened up to his full height with a series of cracking sounds. The musky tones of his odor had gone away, replaced by a sweeter smell, like vanilla, though the smell of salt remained. Once he was standing upright, nearly seven feet tall, Johndo made a high-pitched humming sound.

"Wannoshay," the alien said a moment later, his voice lilting and high-pitched, almost whistling from his lipless mouth. He reached a wrapped hand behind him until he found the twisted piece of metal again. Leaning on it again, as if standing upright left him unbalanced, he raised his bandaged hands toward Joshua. Four stubby fingers peeked out of the bandages.

Joshua swallowed, blinking rapidly. His could feel his heart beating too fast, but he managed to nod at the alien and lift his lips into the semblance of a smile.

"Wannoshay ha' weagh shun," Johndo said, and Joshua realized the alien was speaking English, talking about what must have been the weak sun of his home planet. "Ha' cyguls of longh . . ." ('darkness' was symbolized by a four-fingered

hand held over the gap in the bandages where Joshua assumed the alien's eyes were, the hand dropping slowly like a sun sinking against the horizon).

"Cyguls of shun shorden" (the bandaged hand moved down his face faster and faster), "coldh cyguls more, more." Johndo's arms spread wide as he spoke of the cold nights, his four-fingered hands reaching out to the dark metal walls, almost brushing the soldier next to the colonel. "Wannoshay shun, dhyingh . . ."

Johndo continued his story, and Joshua was able to piece most of his story together, though the effort was tiring. Something about the way Johndo spoke made something inside Joshua's brain itch. But he found it easier to understand the alien when Johndo used a combination of gestures, intonations, and the occasional spoken word to get his point across. Sometimes he could have sworn he heard Johndo's low, warbling voice in his head, even when the Wannoshay's mouth didn't move.

Joshua saw the story of the alien people take shape in his eyes, in his ears, and in his mind. With the cooling of their planet, the People (from the forceful way Johndo said it, Joshua felt the word needed capitalization) moved to the caves, turning their backs on the upper world. They dug deeper and deeper into the earth with their tools, and sometimes with their hands. They built new homes underground, close to the warm, freshwater springs protected from the cold above.

And there they stayed, until they encountered . . . someone . . .

Johndo paused and lowered his head, as if he'd run out of words.

Joshua was leaning forward, on the verge of losing his balance, when the Wannoshay stopped talking. He thought the alien had said some sort of name. Something like 'my light'. Or 'twilight'.

"Who?" he whispered. "Who did you find? What about twilight?"

A shiver passed over Johndo's long body, starting at his bare gray feet and rippling up through his bony torso and stopping at his lipless mouth, which was almost hidden in his face. His sweet smell had turned salty.

"Johndo?" Joshua said, stepping closer.

"Easy, Father," the colonel said, and the sound of his voice cooled Joshua's curiosity. He'd forgotten about the colonel and the three other soldiers in the room with their pulse weapons now resting in their arms.

"Now," Johndo said in a slow, deliberate voice that Joshua heard inside his head more than with his ears. "Now we live here." The itching sensation in Joshua's brain intensified for a second, and then disappeared. "I am glad, grateful you came to us. We needed to talk, but only with your people's Elders. Not a warrior, not a student of battle. Only an Elder like you, for you are aware of the soul of a people. Think not of twilight, but think now of the dawn. For only an Elder knows what must be taken on faith."

Inhaling Johndo's shifting scents of vanilla and salt, Joshua realized Johndo was no longer talking aloud in his graceful mix of words, gestures, and intonations. Johndo was talking directly to him, inside his head, and the priest felt both violated and awed.

"Know a people's true history, know their soul," Johndo said with another shudder. His voice was fading, growing weaker while his short-fingered, bandaged hands began to quiver at his sides.

"Tell me more," Joshua whispered. "Please."

But the alien was no longer talking. His shoulders sagged, and the skin Joshua could see under the layers of bandages was gray mixed with traces of pink, like scar tissue.

Putting all of his weight against the flexible black metal behind him as if exhausted, Johndo the alien let out a hissing breath and inclined his head toward Joshua.

Your turn, that look said to Joshua. The smell of vanilla had disappeared, and the alien's four-fingered hands had stopped shaking.

Looking over at the colonel and his three fellow soldiers, one of whom, Joshua now noticed, had been recording the entire conversation with a small lapel camera, he took a deep breath. He held the cold air in his lungs and let the salty odor of the alien fill his nose. Then he exhaled and began talking.

"The world was created in six days," he began. "And on the seventh day, God" – Joshua pointed up, his face warming – "rested. After that, things became interesting."

Stopping for breath half an hour later, Joshua had covered most of Genesis mixed in with some Darwin, and he was now following that with a condensed version of the New Testament. Johndo listened intently, and Joshua did his best to not lose the thread of his narrative whenever the tall alien's body rippled with more of his convulsive movements. There was so much Joshua could have told Johndo, and he felt inadequate for the task. Surely there were historians better suited for this sort of task.

Before Joshua could continue with his abridged history of humanity, the Wannoshay made a fist and punched the metal structure on which he was resting. The metal dented, then slowly oozed back into shape, and the indentation disappeared.

Colonel Cossa, standing just a few feet away, stepped forward as if he'd been waiting for such an action. "That's enough for today, Father," he said. "Good work. We'll leave Johndo here, and I'll get you back to your church. But first I'd like to show you something."

Joshua looked back at Johndo, whose hands were still clenched into fists, and saw that two of the other three soldiers in the room had managed to slip some sort of restraints onto his bandaged wrists. The restraints were made of the same dull, oozing metal as the alien's chair, with a narrow band of steel in the middle that didn't yield to the alien's sudden thrashing. He could smell something burning now instead of the comforting, familiar scents of salt or vanilla.

"It's for his own good," the colonel said, touching Joshua's arm to lead him out of the room. "Otherwise he'd injure himself. We think it's some sort of reaction to the warmth of our planet, plus they have a low stimulation threshold, and I think he probably passed it about ten minutes ago. But he's never communicated so much in one day with us before. Nice work. Now, come with me, please, Father."

They turned away from the sight of Johndo's exposed gray skin, mottled now with purplish-red splotches. Joshua shuddered as he was led down a sloping passage away from the meeting room.

At the bottom of the hall stood three more soldiers, wearing full body armor and armed with pulse rifles. At their feet was a thick, ugly hatch made of a bluish metal so unlike the smooth, unshining black metal of the alien ship that it had to have been made by human hands.

Two of the soldiers turned the wheel at the top of the hatch and lifted it while the third squatted down in front of the opening. Her gun was aimed straight into the widening gap. A sharper smell of mud mixed with salt drifted out from the other side of the hatch, and Joshua felt his heart drop. In the

back of his mind he'd been wondering this about the aliens all afternoon, even as Johndo told him about their dying sun, their rejuvenated ships, and their rushed departure from their dying planet.

"What is this?" he said, his voice a croak.

"Just take a look," the colonel murmured from beside Joshua. "So you know what we're dealing with here, Father."

Barely breathing, Joshua leaned closer to the dark opening in the floor of the ship. A soft humming came from below, but the sound was not caused by any sort of machine. This humming came from something alive. This was where the rest of the Wannoshay had been hidden. The rest of the People.

"A light, Private," Cossa said, and the young woman on Joshua's right popped a hand light. Orange light filled the small room and the hole at their feet.

Feeling slightly light-headed, Father Joshua looked down and saw that a cave had been dug underneath the alien ship. Tunnels extended away from a main rounded area easily fifty feet wide, its walls made up of black, hard-packed Illinois dirt. Bitter cold rose up from the cave and its tunnels like a wintry wind.

Did they dig all these tunnels in the past two months? Joshua wanted to ask Cossa, but his mouth wouldn't cooperate. Aliens from space, digging in the hard Illinois dirt? Hundreds of aliens, hundreds of the People.

Their skin was an uneven, pale gray color, as if they'd never been in the sun, and there was something wrong with the long, oval shape of their heads. Other than those on their hands, they had no bandages covering their bodies. They flinched away from the soldier's light, and a handful of the aliens swung their long arms, striking those closest to them and causing a ripple of movement that was quickly quieted.

Too many, he thought, moving away from the hole as he felt the world lurch around him. He stared dumbly at the strange vertical growth on their foreheads and their writhing hair, until his eyes lost focus. There were too many of them to have all fit in this ship.

His next thought, to his lasting shame every time he thought about that first sighting later, was one of fear: fear of getting too close and contracting some sickness that these beings may have carried with them from another world.

Leprosy, he thought, reeling slightly. Contagion. Like the sick and the dying come to visit Jesus and his disciples, hoping for a miracle by the touch of his hand.

As Joshua stared, wrestling with his own fears, the aliens below him stopped pushing closer. They looked up at him with their oval faces and black eyes. And then, at the same time, as if choreographed, the vertical growths in the middle of each of their foreheads quivered and opened, exposing a black, sideways eye.

"Close it," Joshua whispered, hands in front of his mouth and nose. "Please turn off that light and close the hatch. Please."

The colonel pulled him gently back from the edge of the hole, and the three soldiers let the hatch drop back to the floor, sealing the hole again. The black, nearly liquid metal of the floor shook from the impact, buckling, and then flattening again. The slam of the closing hatch reverberated in Father Joshua's ears all the way back to his church, and it would continue to echo in his mind and thoughts for many weeks to come.

Spring was quickly approaching, bringing with it a premature heat that sucked the air out of Father Joshua's small tent. Wiping sweat from his forehead, he glanced from one of the

three flat screens on his desk to another. Joshua loved his new job.

The leftmost screen was running a recreation of the estimated landing trajectories of the alien ships, twenty-nine streaks running east to west. The middle screen was filled with windows of various Bible passages that he was supposed to be reviewing for Sunday's sermon. The third was connected to a split CNNBC Netstream, the left half streaming a story about a protest in northern Iowa by HETA, Humans for the Ethical Treatment of Aliens, while the right half ran a report covering the first day of work for a dozen Wannoshay at a construction site in St Paul.

"Enter Secure mode," Joshua said into the mike attached to the side of his face like a growth. "Password only, my voice only, active now."

He peeled off the mike, set it down, and stepped away from the desk. As he stretched out the bunched muscles of his shoulders, he thought about the sudden changes in the past few weeks. After his visit to this landing site last month, the governments of America and Canada and the aliens had come to an agreement: the People (as Joshua now couldn't help but call the Wannoshay) would share the technology from their battered ships if they could leave the landing sites and live above-ground. Through the use of human pharmaceuticals and derm patches, the gray skin of the Wannoshay had been sufficiently toughened against Earth's sun, and the slow process of integration had begun.

And, as the only human Johndo would talk to on the Waukegan landing site, Joshua had become an ad-hoc ambassador for the People. He'd been given a temporary office in a tent filled with the best Netstream and computer equipment government funds could purchase. Joshua found himself in a techie-junkie's heaven, though all the gadgets surrounding him couldn't dispel his Catholic guilt: every second spent away from his congregation pulled at him like dead weight.

Dabbing at his wet forehead with his handkerchief, Joshua checked the time on one of his screens. He was due in Colonel Cossa's tent in ten minutes for a briefing. He grabbed his Bible and his Army-issue glasses and walked outside. The sky was cloudless, a beautiful afternoon in late May marred only by the occasional shouts of the protestors and other groups massed outside the landing site. The people on the other side of the fence never seemed to leave, much less sleep.

Inhaling the country air, Joshua made his way to the colonel's tent, trying to decide how to start his sermon for tomorrow's Mass. As a challenge to himself, he was determined to talk about something other than the People, but he kept drawing a blank every time he tried to come up with something more relevant.

The colonel wasn't in, but there was a note inside the tent door for Joshua. The note was attached to a long, rectangular package made of black metal that was bent in two, like an old-fashioned notebook computer. The two ends of the outer piece of metal were held together by a black wire.

When he saw the thin sheets of metal inside the thicker, bent piece, Joshua realized it looked like an actual notebook, from back when people used paper all the time. He picked up the piece of slick black metal, his fingers wanting to pull away from the icy feel of the thin slices of stacked metal inside.

The colonel's careful block letters on the piece of temporary paper read: father: what do you make of this? just found this today along with a dozen others inside flooring of ship. keep it for a while before our linguists get it. we'll talk then.

With sunshine warming his face, Joshua sat down on the

front step of the colonel's tent and unwrapped the wire that held the outer piece of metal together and kept the thin sheaves of flat black metal inside. The colonel's note had already dissolved and dripped onto the ground next to him when Joshua unbent the cold metal, the bend disappearing without a seam once the metal was laid flat across his lap. Before he could marvel at the behavior of the outer metal 'cover', the sheaves spilled out, sliding off the now-smooth surface and onto the ground. One of the thin pieces of metal nicked the back of Joshua's right hand as it fell.

"Nice work, McDowell," he muttered, looking at all the loose pieces of metal surrounding him like fallen leaves. He ignored the tiny cut on his hand and carefully gathered up the pieces, avoiding the razor-sharp edges. Some of the pieces were square, others circular, some oval, and a dozen were octagonal in shape. Arranging them by shape on the two steps next to him, Joshua soon had four separate piles.

The original piece of thick metal that had held the thinner pieces together now lay limply on his lap like a heavy blanket. Joshua thought about Johndo's chair inside the ship, and the restraints of black metal the colonel occasionally wrapped around Johndo's wrists. This material seemed to be the same stuff. Glancing off to his left and then his right, wondering what he must look like, sitting there, Joshua took the thick piece of metal and rolled it up from one end like a bedroll. The metal cooperated, and he set the thick tube of metal on the step behind him as a back rest.

"Unbelievable," he whispered, the cold of the metal against his lower back seeping through his shirt in a not unpleasant way, cooling him off.

Finally, he picked up an octagonal piece of thin metal from the biggest pile and held it up to his face. He'd left his reading glasses back in his tent, but he didn't want to waste time to go back and get them. Squinting and holding it about two feet from his face with his head turned to one side, he saw that the black metal was covered in spiraling gray and white designs that were made up of raised icons and rounded mandalas. He found an occasional symbol that made him think of Greek characters, while the other symbols reminded him of Aramaic.

At first he was overwhelmed by all the meaningless slash marks and jagged scribbles, but when he considered the markings as a whole, he saw that there was some sort of organization. It helped when he put himself in the mindset of Johndo's manner of speaking, a combination of spoken word, motions, and intonations. The symbols couldn't be deciphered from left to right, or right to left, he decided. But every time he started to feel something start to make sense, he'd hear the chanting of the protestors outside the fence drifting over to him.

"Let them all free!" one group shouted, only to be answered by "Lock them all up!" Joshua tried to focus in spite of the battling voices. Usually the people outside were fairly peaceful and quiet, but today was going to be one of those off-kilter days, he could tell.

Joshua's head began to ache, but he continued examining the book, turning it slowly and running his hands softly over the raised icons and designs. Everything on the page seemed to have some sort of circular nature; if something wasn't a spiral, then it was a circle or oval, crisscrossed with slashes and wavy lines.

Something about those shapes and designs made him think about Johndo's hands. Stubby fingers that were almost always hooked into a clawing shape, like four fat Cs on the ends of his hands. Joshua glanced at the thin line of drying blood on the back of his own hand, a simple, mundane design when

compared to Johndo's.

A pair of Humvees suddenly roared to life three tents down from where Joshua was sitting, making him forget about his and Johndo's hands. Feeling foolish for leaving the remaining pages of this book of the People out in the sun and dust, Joshua carefully gathered up all the pages and unrolled the thick metal covering from the step. While the Hummers hurried past, no doubt on their way to the protestors at the front gate, Joshua made sure not to touch the razor-sharp sides as he placed the pages into the cover.

Joshua winced at the sounds of gunshots outside the fence, and he prayed for rubber bullets. He looked off in the direction of the gate and listened, but all he could hear was the flap of the tents in the breeze. He turned back to the sheets of metal, hoping the silence would continue.

Fifteen minutes slipped past as he paged through the metals sheets, and the heat of the day was forgotten. He didn't dare to think that he was lucky enough to hold a piece of the People's true history, but he could always hope. And he could always ask Johndo. Tomorrow. Tonight, Joshua had to get back home to see if he still had a congregation left for Sunday's sermon.

Early the next day, wearing his short-sleeved black shirt and white collar, Joshua held his hand up to Johndo, trying to remember the proper word.

"Iwolo," he said at last. His voice fell flat in the black-metal confines of the ship. He ran his forefinger over the dark red slash on the back of his hand, hoping he'd pronounced the word correctly. "A scratch," he added. "That's all. Iwolo."

In the past month, with the help of a team of three linguists and his own skills with language, Joshua had been understanding more and more of the language of the People. Joshua had decided that Wannoshay was a much more fun language to learn than Latin had ever been. He liked the lilting way it flowed off his tongue, with few hard consonants to get in the way.

Leaning forward in his chair of smooth, almost-liquid metal, Johndo the Wannoshay blinked all three of his eyes as he stared at the wound Joshua had gotten from the book yesterday.

"Iwolo?" Johndo said, his lipless mouth barely moving. His middle eye closed for a moment. "Gratch?"

Joshua had forgotten all about the scratch until he'd walked into Johndo's small room aboard the ship. Lit by a single orb next to the open doorway, the black walls were bare, and the only furniture was the metal chair Johndo was resting on, a second chair that was wider and shorter, a mat on the floor, and a low black shelf at Joshua's eye level that ran the entire width of the room. The shelf in Johndo's room had always been empty, and this fact had always for some reason saddened Joshua.

"Yes," Joshua said. "From this." He held up the book he'd spent most of the night studying back in the rectory of Our Lady.

Johndo flinched, pulling his oval-shaped head back, as if the sight of the book bothered him. A bitter smell similar to burnt coffee filled the room for an instant. Joshua glanced at the doorway to his right, where he saw the armored shoulder of the young soldier who'd escorted him into the ship. The priest had never forgotten Johndo's fists from his first visit, punching his chair until the colonel restrained him.

"Is it a book?" Joshua said. "A . . . neowo? To read?"

A few thick strands of Johndo's short, tentacle-like hair plucked at the last three bandages covering the slowly-healing scars on his mottled gray face. Joshua knew the pink derm

patch on the back of Johndo's neck was finally doing its work, but as one of the first of the People to risk Earth's atmosphere unprotected, Johndo's burns had been deep.

"No," Johndo said at last. "Not neowo, Yotchooa."

Joshua sighed. He went over to the second chair and rested his back against it. The chair molded itself to his body, taking most of his weight.

"If it's not a book," he muttered, "what in the world is it?"

Johndo took the book from Joshua's hands and carried it to his mat, holding it away from his long torso with his short, curved fingers. Joshua couldn't tell if Johndo was being extra careful with it, or if he simply didn't want to touch it. He had so much to learn about the People, and he felt incredibly tired at the prospect.

Letting Johndo busy himself with the book, Joshua closed his eyes and bounced slightly on the cold metal of the chair. He thought about the three new complaints he'd found on his Netstream when he'd returned home to the rectory last night. One of them had contacted the archbishop about Joshua being gone so much. He hadn't taken a confession in over a month. Joshua never felt like he had enough time, and his congregation was paying for it.

Just before opening his eyes again, Joshua thought of the words of Johndo from their first discussion, the words that Johndo had spoken directly to Joshua's mind: "Know a people's true history, know their soul."

When he opened his eyes, Johndo had taken the book apart and spread the pieces around the room.

"Johndo," Joshua whispered, pulling himself free of the metal grip of the chair.

On the shelf that circled the room, Johndo had placed the thin sheaves of metal that Joshua had come to think of as pages of a book. They didn't appear to be leaning on the wall so much as stuck to it, in some sort of pattern according to shape: octagon, rectangle, circle, oval. But none of the shapes were arranged in a way that Joshua could see as meaningful.

Bent over and running with his hands on the floor, Johndo ran over to his mat and grabbed the final sheet of metal, an octagon-shaped piece, and took it to the last empty space on the shelf on the other side of the room. While the shelf and its new contents were at eye-level for Joshua, when Johndo reared up on his feet, the shelf only reached up to his wide chest. The soldier peeked into the room for a second at the sound of Johndo's footsteps, and Joshua waved him away.

"Not neowo, Yotchooa," Johndo said again, holding the sheet a foot away from the wall. He hadn't put it in place yet. His mouth opened in what could have been a Wannoshay grin, the four rows of his sharpened teeth glistening in the light of the room's orb.

Joshua took one final glance at the ring of pages encircling him – only the gray and white symbols were visible now, the metal blending into that of the wall – and then returned his attention to Johndo. Not knowing what else to do, Joshua nodded.

"True history," Johndo said in a clear voice inside Joshua's head. He placed the final metal page into the wall of his room.

White light shot straight out from each of the sheets, cutting the room in half, top to bottom. Joshua choked on his own breath, thinking he'd been blinded at first. When he blinked and inhaled, smelling Johndo's comforting odor of salt and mud instead of the bitter burnt-coffee smell, he saw that he was in a darkened cave filled with the People.

The darkness was staved off by a greenish glow coming from strands of lichen attached to the rough angle formed where

the cave wall met the cave ceiling. The walls were ridged and irregular, as if carved out by hand. Over two dozen gray-skinned, shuddering People stood on all fours, huddled around a trio of lighter-skinned People, males with long bluish-black hair tentacles and scars crisscrossing the length of their bare chests. Joshua's eyes adjusted immediately to the gloom, and then he saw the same scene sideways, from a slightly higher vantage point. Too shocked to move or speak, Joshua could only watch as the People pushed forward, reaching out to the three males, who inched backwards until they were up against the cave wall. High-pitched voices sang a Wannoshay word that Joshua couldn't translate at first, a word of too many vowels and not enough hard consonants. The singing became loud as a scream, yet somehow it never lost its strange beauty. Twitching arms and squirming tentacle-hairs filled Joshua's split perceptions, and the light from the lichen began to fade. Before a scream of his own could escape Joshua's lips, the vision ended.

Joshua lay on his side on the floor of Johndo's room, hands over his ears and gasping for air. He couldn't smell anything now except his own sweat. All he could hear was the People's word that they'd been screaming over and over again like a curse. He recognized it: Twilight.

A tentative hand touched the front of his shirt, and the scream that Joshua had swallowed nearly rose to the surface again.

"Yotchooa?"

Joshua pulled free of the hand before he realized who it was in front of him.

"Johndo," he gasped. "What happened?"

Johndo had left his side. He rushed around the room on all fours, collecting the metal sheets from the shelf, pulling the sheets roughly off the wall, oblivious to the sharp edges even as they cut into his fingers. His breath whistled in and out of his lipless mouth, and his wide shoulders twitched.

"Johndo?" Joshua said, looking at the fresh scratches on Johndo's fingers, dripping reddish-purple blood. Many, many iwolo.

Joshua touched the scratch on the back of his own hand as Johndo gathered the sheets in what appeared to be a haphazard manner and closed the cover. He saw the strange designs carved like tattoo or scars on the back of each of Johndo's gray hands, two intersecting ovals inside an octagon. The room now smelled like salt, and something deeper, more pungent, like rotting fruit.

Joshua slid across the cold floor, closer to the where Johndo paused above the book and the mat, panting. Some of the pages sat behind Johndo, pages Joshua hadn't seen on the wall before the vision overtook all his senses. He looked back at Johndo, whose wide shoulders were quivering as his fingers dripped blood onto the black floor. The blood dissipated as soon as it hit, as if being absorbed. Looking at the expanse of Johndo's elongated spine through his thin T-shirt, Joshua heard a warning in the back of his mind that he did his best to ignore.

"Johndo? Were those People . . ." Joshua knew he shouldn't say the word, but he couldn't stop himself. "Were they twilight?"

The soldier standing guard outside the room, having seen something different in the way Johndo was acting, had taken two steps into the room. In the days that followed, Joshua would convince himself that the soldier's

As soon as Joshua uttered the word, Johndo turned on Joshua, and the soldier couldn't prevent Johndo from lashing out with thick arm, hitting Joshua on the right side of the face. The last

thing Joshua thought before the impact of the bloody fingers of Johndo's clawed hand was another word of the People: *Iwolo*:

As his world spun from the blow and bright white light once again flashed into his vision, Joshua saw the soldier grab something on his belt and press a button. Joshua fell to his knees, and Johndo followed suit almost immediately, dropping like dead weight to the metal floor. Johndo's derm patch gave off a trickle of smoke, like a tiny, extinguished campfire.

Not a book, his reeling mind repeated as he struggled to sit up. He thought the words first in English, then in bastardized Wannoshay. With one hand held over the bloody, stinging scratches Johndo had left on his face, the other hand pressed to his chest, Joshua wondered if he would ever get the chance to ask Johndo to explain that statement and answer his original question, or any of the questions that came after it.

Joshua stared at the motionless Wannoshay just a few feet away from him and felt something hopeful and good inside of him begin to die.

As time passed and the bruise and scratches on his right cheek had almost completely faded, Joshua knew he was going to have to return the book of the People back to Colonel Cossa. He was in his tent, sweating, with the metal pages spread out in front of him. Joshua realized he was getting nowhere. If I do recreate the pattern, he thought, do I really want to experience a vision like the one in Johndo's room?

Joshua realized the answer to that question was Yes.

He would have been happy to see Johndo again, but the colonel had declared Johndo off-limits to all visitors after attacking Joshua. While Joshua thought the incident had been mostly a big misunderstanding, he couldn't argue too much with the colonel – Johndo's glancing blow had nearly knocked him out.

But let's just forget about that for now, Joshua told himself. I have to try and remember the pattern. Surely there was a method to how Johndo had arranged the pages.

After sitting, eyes closed, for almost five minutes, Joshua thought he had it. He picked up the book, carefully pulled the pages free, and held the first page, an oval shape, up to his tent wall. With a little pressure, the page adhered itself to the wooden frame of the tent. Almost afraid to breathe, Joshua arranged the four dozen metal pages against the walls of his small tent. With each page in place the air seemed to grow a tiny bit warmer.

Joshua stopped with a start when he came to the final eight pages. These sheets were all blank, and he couldn't remember where or how they fit into Johndo's pattern.

"Give me strength, Father," he said, looking from the pages in his hand to those resting side-by-side on his tent wall. After a moment he began placing individual sheets into the remaining gaps. "And please don't let me blow this place up."

When Joshua pressed the final blank page against the wall, each page erupted with a beam of pure white light, and he had time to take one quick breath before he was immersed in not just one vision, but a series of them.

The first of the new visions began where the last one ended, in the cave filled with alien singing that bordered on shrieking. Joshua tried without any success to find the three light-skinned People that had been surrounded by the darker-skinned People – Johndo's People, he assumed. Joshua felt himself pulled along with the convulsing flow of gray bodies reaching forward, almost melting into one another. The wild singing stopped, replaced by anguished screaming and the sounds of flesh meeting flesh. Bits of long, bluish-black hair filled the air,

landing in the glowing lichen above him and dousing the cave with darkness.

A brilliant light flashed in the darkness, and the violence against the three aliens was interrupted a quaking sensation that knocked most of the People off-balance. A heartbeat later they were all running through greenish light of the rough-hewn caves, toward the source of the ongoing tremor.

With another flash of white light they arrived in a massive cave where a black ship was roaring to life. The angular ship shook off what looked to be years of accumulated dust and mold and glowing lichen as it began to work its way up through the cave. The spires at its top blasted through the rock with small bursts of controlled explosions.

In a flash Joshua saw more ships emerging from the massive caves, and all of them were filled with gray-skinned People.

In another flash he was onboard one of the ships, looking back at the caves that had been the People's home for many generations ('many cycles' Johndo would have called them). More of the People were rushing into the ship, and now Joshua could see that they were being pursued. Through the dual perspective of his two eyes mixed with the sideways Wannoshay eye, Joshua saw a mass of lighter-skinned People rush the ship, pounding on its flat black walls even as the ships pushed away from the cave floor.

"Twilight. The People of Twilight." The voice sounded like Johndo's, when he would speak directly inside Joshua's head.

With another flash, Joshua saw the ships break through the surface of a desolate planet rimmed in blue ice, and in another flash they were a mile above it. The flashes came faster now, almost too fast for Joshua to comprehend: aliens packed into black casks for the long journey, a gray claw burning symbols into an octagonal metal sheet, a lone figure threading its way among the stacked casks, its long back bent as if with a great weight.

And with a final blinding flash, the vision ended, releasing Joshua.

A cold wind whipped into his tent, knocking the sheets of metal from his tent walls. It was only through a miracle of luck that he avoided getting cut by sharp edges of the falling pages. He lay on the hard floor, stunned, thinking that he must have arranged the pages in the wrong manner, and now he was paying for it. Too late he remembered Johndo's small pile of blank pages.

"Johndo," he murmured, picking up the pieces of the book. He put the pages back in place inside their metal holder, his chest aching almost as badly as it had the day of his heart attack. He set the book on his desk and slid its sharp sides away from the edge of his desk before he walked out of his tent.

Joshua was resting outside on the front step of his tent, wondering if the soldiers were still keeping Johndo in restraints somewhere in the encampment, when his glasses began beeping. With shaking hands he slipped on his military-grade glasses and blinked at a flashing Netstream icon. Along with the four messages he'd missed while he was working with the book, Joshua saw that there were a flood of news stories scrolling across the inside of his glasses.

When he saw the initial reports, he knew he wasn't going to get a chance to chat about the book with the colonel. The events of the world had once again changed his plans and his life forever.

The news reports were focused on an explosion at a brewery in Milwaukee, only a few hours' drive from where Joshua sat right now. Watching the news feed loop past his glasses for the

fifth time, Joshua reached a trembling hand up to his mouth, and then his fingers slid over to the healing scars on his cheek.

From the tone of the 'Stream reporters and various message boards, the explosion did not appear to be accidental. Joshua had heard those words together all too many times in the past decade.

He spent the next hour behind his glasses, constantly wiping sweat from his forehead to keep his spectacles clean. Terrorism had been everyone's initial knee-jerk reaction, either from the various enemies of the unending war overseas or suicide cultists.

And then the word got out on the 'Streams that somehow some of the People had been inside the brewery at the time of the explosion. The entire tone of the reports changed from a somewhat familiar dread to a sharper, more hysterical pitch. Reports abounded of People being rounded up like cattle from the landing sites and their new apartment complexes. Half an hour later, the first 'Stream stories began to circulate about another explosion, this time at an elevator in South Dakota.

So much, Joshua thought, for the integration process.

Private Petersheim, who had been named Joshua's Chaplain's Assistant back in March, interrupted Joshua as he was downloading yet another 'Stream report to his spectacles.

"Time to go, padre," Petersheim said in a tight voice. Joshua was shocked to see the anger and fear on the young man's face.

One their way out of the landing site, Joshua bit his tongue when he noticed that the People still living in the ship and the caves below it had been placed under armed guard. Outside the fence, they passed protestors hidden behind their cheap Netstream glasses or watching the latest heartrending news unfold on portable screens in their cars, eerily silent again. Any second now, Joshua feared, the massed people were going to explode.

On the drive back to the Shrine of Our Lady, Joshua realized he'd left his Bible in his tent. All he had was the book of the People in his hands. He felt like he was somehow responsible for the explosions in Wisconsin and South Dakota. And then he remembered his friend's words.

"Only Elders are in touch with the soul of a people," Johndo had said on that cold day they first met. "Only an Elder knows what must be taken on faith."

Forty-five minutes later, the private turned onto West Lexington and slammed on the brakes to avoid crushing a clot of pedestrians in the street. The crowds reminded Joshua of two sets of the People, in two very different settings: those he'd seen in his vision, and those who were living huddled together under the ship.

The words entered his head, unbidden: *When you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, then know that its desolation has come.*

Joshua grabbed the alien book and touched the arm of the private, who was about to honk at the people in front of them.

"No," Joshua said. "It's okay. These are . . . my people."

"Oh." The private looked at the people and turned back to Joshua. "You've got a big congregation, huh?"

Joshua saw many familiar faces, though it took him a few seconds to recognize most of them. He didn't want to speak with the hypocrites, the humans who had no faith except in times of trouble. He didn't feel like reassuring this band of skeptics that no, the sky was not falling, and no, the aliens weren't coming to kill them in their sleep, and yes, God was still in heaven and all the world would still be here when they wake up.

"Do you want me to stay, father?" Petersheim asked.

Once again, Joshua heard the slam of the hatch closing inside the ship. "Your redemption is drawing near," he imagined saying to his returned congregation. "Deal with it however you may."

The crowd spread out in front of him, not noticing the big car at first as they all pushed their way closer to the church. From the safe, cool confines of the sedan, Joshua could see old man Ribisi with his oxygen facemask near the entrance, and Mrs Consiglione rolling her walker across the street, slow as an old car going up a steep hill.

Take me out of here, he almost said.

Then he felt the metal pages of the book the colonel had given him in his hand. He looked down and instead of his Bible, he held an alien book in his hands. The metal edges threatened to cut into his hands from his tight grip, and then, the metal pages softened, yielding to his touch. He ran a finger across a page of the book and the symbols disappeared, melting into the flat black metal, leaving an empty page in front of him.

It wasn't really a book, Joshua realized, but a kind of journal. An incomplete record. There were still many pages left to be filled, more work left to be done. Much more work.

"Private," Joshua said. "Thanks for the ride. You can let me out right here. Take care of yourself, son."

Heat blasted him in the face the instant he stepped out of the car. Joshua looked out at the members of his congregation as they came up to him, calling out his name. Carrying the book of the Wannoshay in his hands, Joshua took one step, and then another, back toward his church and his returned people.

With his congregation crowded around him, Joshua could only make out snippets of conversation, flashes of sentences from the many voices around him:

"Father, the aliens were running out of the brewery right before it blew up . . ."

"It was the cultists, Father . . ."

"Father, I don't understand . . ."

"Got to put all of the aliens away so they can't hurt us like this again . . ."

"Father . . . Father . . ."

Joshua gently removed the hands reaching out for him. "Follow me," he said in a voice that silenced those around him. His chest gave one final twinge of pain as he walked up the steps, and then he forgot about everything but his people behind him and the book in his hands. He had the pages free by the time he walked through the humming security arch. His congregation dropped into the pews, watching him in a shocked silence. Joshua turned to the left-hand side of his church and began arranging the first of metal pages against the walls. He placed them below the stained glass windows and next to the Stations of the Cross. And this time he remembered to hold back the blank pages of the metal book.

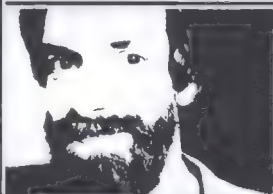
Joshua knew he had to show his congregation as much of the People's true history as they could handle. It was the only way they'd understand. Long before he pushed the final eight-sided page with its swirl of almost-decipherable gray symbols against the wall, the heat and energy in the church had already begun to build. As white light filled his church and reflected a rainbow of colors off the stained glass windows, Father Joshua prayed that he and Johndo's People would have time to complete the blank pages of this book, and many books after that.

Michael Jasper has published nearly forty stories in various magazines and anthologies, and a collection, *Gunning for the Buddha*, was published by Prime Books in October 2004. Mike lives with his wife Elizabeth in Raleigh, North Carolina, USA.



Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow: a bizarre and original narrative vision

RICK LOWE



MUTANT POPCORN

FILM REVIEWS



e are all interested in the future, for that is where you and I will spend the rest of our – What?

No, I'm broadcasting; I'll just have a slice of toast. – Hr-hm. Now, at last, it is permitted to communicate to your time the secret that we future-dwellers know so intimately: *the future is duff*. Yes, my friends; like the beer. Here in the future, we experience degrees of disappointment at which you past-dwellers can barely guess. Our children adopt American speech patterns; our microwriting keyboards do not work with PalmOSS. But live long enough in the future, and duffness becomes part of the scenery. Slowly, with almost no pain, the future has recalibrated our sensibility until the duff is assimilated into our faculty of aesthesis. We become able to appreciate

shades of duffness entirely imperceptible to your puny senses.

And believe me, our time is a golden age of duffness. We who live close enough to one of this age's multiplex know that 2004 was truly the Summer of Duff. This was the season people went to see *King Arthur* and *Dodgeball* because there was nothing better showing. The spring alone grossly exceeded the normal annual quota of excellence with *Eternal Sunshine* and a good Harry Potter film, which left the duffers a clear run through the second half of the year. The one sore thumb was *Hellboy*, an almost completely non-duff film that only slunk into the UK summer slate by dint of a couple of seasons on simmer waiting for the local brand-awareness to come to the boil. But there's not really much to Guillermo

del Toro's enthusiastic rendering of the Mignola character and his world beyond an infectious fanboy delight in the source material, allied to the fervid cinematic invention we've come to take for granted from a writer-director canny enough to take time out now and again to remind us that he's ridiculously overqualified to be still making comics movies, and is doing it out of pure geek love.

For connoisseurs of duff, the truest pleasure is to be had in a duff film like *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, which crashed and burned at the box office like the Hindenburg it so rashly namechecks in the opening scene. Of course dialogue, characters, and plotting could have done with a bit more of the development investment that went into the extraordinary visual design. An A-list

The one sore thumb was Hellboy, an almost completely non-duff film that only slunk into the UK summer slate by dint of a couple of seasons on simmer waiting for the local brand-awareness to come to the boil



cast are directed like B-movie actors, perhaps even intentionally; while the trumpeted move to all-bluescreen creates a cinematic world which tends to polarise divisions of foreground and background, actors and scenery, characters and space. And yet, quite apart from its stunning retrofuture bluescreen world and its daringly washed-out, wonky-focussed cinematographic style, this is a film with a genuinely bizarre and original narrative vision. Its extraordinary cocktail of Biggles and Gerry Anderson, and the accompanying nostalgia for a prewar British version of the future, is deeply compelling imaginatively in a way that the actual plot of the film is bound to fail to measure up to. Even as you watch, you wonder whether you're dreaming it, and how anything so improbable managed

to stumble into existence at all.

Of course it's perfectly possible for a completely duff film to make barrowloads of cash. Even longer in the making than *Sky Captain*, *I, Robot*'s vast, generation-spanning development history is a substantial part of the finished film's meaning. The most celebrated phase of this saga, Harlan Ellison's 1978 screenplay, strung a selection of Asimov's early robot stories into a loose anthology narrative framed in a *Citizen Kane* treatment of Susan Calvin. Though a pretty remarkable sf screenplay for its time, neither its structure nor its budgetary requirements did filmability any favours; but it did recognise that the way to animate Asimov's primitive, near-abstract logic puzzles was to cement them into an epic human story centred on the 24-carat asset of the Calvin character.

In contrast, as is now well known, the 2004 version is only *I, Robot* at all as a result of an opportunistic deal that secured the rights to Asimov's title, characters, and stories for a project already in mid-development. The result is a film in which the chewed-up remains of two-and-a-half Asimov characters and



a couple of *I, Robot* stories find themselves trapped in a Will Smith film and forced to ride around on the back of his noisy, polluting vehicle, which soon turns out to be headed somewhere else entirely. To escape the fate of poor Alfred Lanning, peremptorily executed before his first scene, Dr Calvin herself has to suffer a painful makeover as precisely the kind of youthful, decorative, second-string figure she was exciting in the first place for pointedly not being; and even then, her obligations further demand that mid-film she does a PG-compliant shower scene, takes the pins out of her hair, and swap her Persil-white labcoat for black leathers.

And yet it'd be wrong to say the *I, Robot* filmed by Alex Proyas was an entirely unthoughtful reading of Asimov's early robot canon. At the very least, this

is an *I, Robot* for a generation that's lived enough time in the future to distrust the innocence of the young Asimov's cyber-political agenda – to know that monopolistic corporations like Asimov's US Robots can no longer be cast as a force for good, yet with nothing to put in their place beyond clonkingly formulaic action-movie plotting. (In the film, of course, US Robots has rather delightfully become US Robotics. I used to have one of their modems till it developed free will and refused to connect.) The early minutes make a momentary show of flirting with the civil-rights subtext Hollywood has always been leery of in robot fiction, but as soon as the plot gets under way robots stop being the new black folks and instead become the new white goods: iRobots, all whiteness and light and consumer desirability. And at the end, the genie of machine intelligence is pushed back into its bottle, the appliances become our friends again, and the world goes back to the way it was. Just like real life.

A similar finesse capped the summer's other duff robotic remake, Frank Oz's unhappily-received version of *The Stepford Wives*. On the whole, it's



For connoisseurs of duff, the truest pleasure is to be had in a duff film like *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow*, which crashed and burned at the box office like the Hindenburg it so rashly namechecks in the opening scene

come out of its fraught production history rather better than expected: some of the comedy is quite edgy, the Bette Midler character has some good lines, and the title sequence is a short-film masterpiece in its own right that nothing that comes after could hope to top. It's a fairly thankless brief remaking a story built around a revelation that everyone but the characters already knows, particularly as Ira Levin's original novella depended entirely its audience not knowing the final twist – something that was already a problem for the Bryan Forbes/William Goldman version. It's this that's forced the remake down paths of desperation, comedifying the basic scenario and adding a couple of further twists at the end in an effort to compensate for the unsurprisingness of the primary revelation. We'll probably never know how far the rampant incoherence of the present ending results from panicked responses to the notoriously disastrous test screenings, though one suspects this was never going to be a film that made any kind of sense. But it's an important marker of the compromises needed for comedy that the Stepford process in this version turns out to be not

only non-fatal but reversible, and in the end everyone comes back to life with the dysfunctionalities in their lives healed by the experience. Anything less would be just too scary.

I, Robot wasn't the only item to break out after the best part of an eternity in development gulag watching generations of professional tormentors come and go. *Catwoman* has been rubbing round Hollywood's shins in various incarnations and castings ever since the original (and unsurpassed) Daniel Waters script from the golden years of the *Batman* franchise, to which the 2004 *Catwoman* works hard at distancing itself with its bright, colour-saturated look. Since this celebrated catastrophe is already a Golden Raspberry front-runner, it perhaps needs protesting that not everything about *Catwoman* is a complete trainwreck. If the plot, about Sharon Stone's evil plan to hook the women of the free world on a toxic skincream, is wit-insultingly fatuous, it's certainly no more so than that of most Hollywood fantasy films from the past decade, and like *Stepford Wives* it's trying hard to articulate the voice and experience of professional women working within

There's far more fun to be found in *Catwoman* than in M. Night Shyamalan's lugubrious, Amishly-paced *The Village*. What, audiences are urged to spend ninety minutes pondering, is the secret of the gated community in the midst of mysterious woods, and of the clawed things that prowl and bellow in the night in the woods around?



It's an important marker of the compromises needed for comedy that the Stepford process in this version turns out to be not only non-fatal but reversible

the Hollywood system. As the unsettling Stone character notes to her younger nemesis: "I was never more beautiful, never more powerful, and then I turned 40 and they threw me away."

Obviously, Halle Berry has clearly been cast for no other reason than that she's one of the tiny number of female stars able to open films like *Swordfish* and *Gothika* that would otherwise require frogman teams to find them; and this incarnation of *Catwoman* is undoubtedly such a film. But Berry actually turns out to be on rather good form in her light comic civvy-street role as Patience "Not Selina Kyle" Philips, ditzy graphics witch and staggeringly improbable African-American Bridget Jones. It's only when she leathers up in her unfortunate thong outfit and pussycat mask that the floor of the film drops away

to reveal the long dark drop to the septic tank below. Probably no other film has been so completely destroyed by a mere costume – though in fairness it has to be said that performance and direction are equally guilty of conspiring to abet an awesomely misconceived visual interpretation of the character, which in turn finds itself intercut for stunt sequences with spectacularly badly-animated cg versions that barely match with the live shots at all.

Nevertheless, there's far more fun to be found in *Catwoman* than in M. Night Shyamalan's lugubrious, Amishly-paced *The Village*. What, audiences are urged to spend ninety minutes pondering, is the secret of the gated community in the midst of mysterious woods, and of the clawed things that prowl and bellow in the night in the woods around? Is their

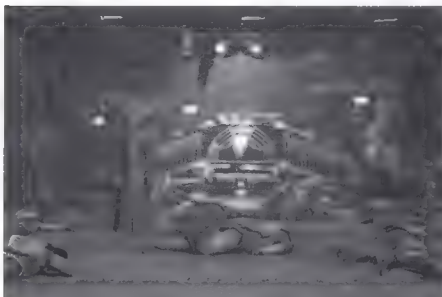
tightly-bounded world a post-apocalypse enclave, an alien colony, a Dark City, a metaphysical borderland, a microverse, a robot farm, a human zoo, or something less interesting than all of the foregoing which the trained sf viewer will have accurately guessed within the first ten minutes? and is there anything left to care about while we wait for the film to catch up? It's a shame, because alongside the smoke and mirrors surrounding the deeply anticlimactic and silly secret is one really rather clever narrative coup: the revelation at the midpoint of the film that the protagonist isn't the character we've been assuming, so that by the time the final credits roll the names are in a different order from those at the front. And though the absurdities accelerate precipitously downhill from that point, the fleeting glimpse of the Hollywood equivalent of a first law violation makes for a briefly invigorating criminal frisson, before the lapse back into ponderous longeurs and deeply incredible plotting.

The Chronicles of Riddick landed as a generally derided film with a rather good computer game, but deserves some credit for the sheer number of risks taken,

resemblance whatever). The major disappointment is that the intended status as a franchise-starter leaves some of the most evocative ideas unused in this instalment – such as the enigmatic Underverse, “a constellation of dark new worlds” we’re expecting and hoping to visit in the course of the film, but at the end are consigned to a future we’re deeply unlikely ever to see. On the plus side, though, it features the killer duff line of the season (surely one of Vin’s): “It’s been a long time since I smelled beautiful.” The adjective seems meant as the object of a transitive verb, rather than adverbial with intransitive. But that’s not what you hear.

Still basically duff, and yet so unlike what we’ve come to expect from sf film that mere disappointment seems an entirely irrelevant response, is the little arthouse oddity *Code 46* from the anomalously prolific Brit-team of Michael Winterbottom and his writer Frank Cottrell Boyce (whose next may already be out by the time these words are printed). One of those films where the opening coproduction splashes seem to go on longer than the titles, *Code 46* is undeniably affected by some of the

Not a film to be accused of sacrificing sweep and spectacle to banausic notions of sensemaking, *The Chronicles of Riddick* makes an enthusiastic effort to rise above its vanity-project origins



beginning with the acceptance of creative input from Vin Diesel (who is presumably responsible for the engagingly adolescent planet names like Furia and Crematoria). It's gratifying to see sf B-list veteran David Twohy rewarded with a blockbuster budget at last, and even more so to see him blow the wad on a mad attempt at soaring multiplanetary adventure on a novelistic scale of a kind taboo in Hollywood since *Dune*.

Not a film to be accused of sacrificing sweep and spectacle to banausic notions of sensemaking, *Riddick* makes an enthusiastic effort to rise above its vanity-project origins; and whatever one thinks of Vinnie as a visioner of epic sf mythologies it's still the nearest thing to an mileage-efficient Diesel vehicle since *Pitch Black* itself (to which it has the chutzpah to disdain any

familiar duffnesses of Lottery cinema. While some of its disregard for Hollywood patterns of revelation and closure is deliberate, it's also quite a clumsily assembled story, with a lot of emergency voiceover plainly dubbed on in post-production to try and raise the frankly tepid emotional and narrative temperature. As it turns out, nothing could save the chemistry-free performances of Tim Robbins and Samantha Morton as the star-crossed lovers who fall foul of future legislation forbidding sex with close clones. Individually, these are appealing and often admirable performers, but not a pair anyone would normally be interested in watching simulate sex acts.

Fortunately, the film has almost as little interest in its characters as we do. Conceptually dense and oblique in a way

more novelistic than cinematic, *Code 46* is far less about narrative than setting: a complex dystopian extrapolation of globalised culture, climate-scarred geopolitics, and an economic polarisation of haves and have-nots, divided the insurance coverage that allows them to play a role in the white economy. In a way familiar from print sf but almost unknown in recent cinema, it's a complex future world whose rationale has to be pieced together from cryptic throwaways and fragments. And, like the future itself, it ends without closure, with mysteries unsolved, and with everybody less happy than they started. As a twentieth-century man of vision once remarked, future events like these will affect all of us in the future. Enjoy the time, my friends.





In the place where I was born, stones had been used to mark boundaries for four hundred years. We harrowed stones up in fields, turned them up in roadcuts. We built the foundations of houses from stones, dug them around and between them. We made stone walls, and our greatest poet wrote poems about those walls and their lichen-speckled granite. The gift of glaciers, and the wry joke of farmers. "She'll grow a ton and a half an acre, between the stones." The people who lived there before mine made tools of them, made weights and currency.

This is an alien landscape. Another world. A cold empty desert on the other side of a long, cold sleep, light-years away from the place I grew up in and can never go home to. A place that lies across a gulf of cannibalized colony ships and unfeeling stars.

But stones are a boundary here, too. They mark the line between life and death, between our pitiful attempts to terraform and the natives' land with its stark stone cities and empty plains. And *this* stone, wound about with a windblown veil dark blue as the autumn sky of my homeland, so much brighter than the dusty firmament of this one – *This* stone marks other things.

A body was buried here. Not long ago. And not a human one.

I'm the xenobiologist. There's a sonic shovel buried in my pack beside the sample kits, and an overwhelming sense thumping in my chest that what I'm about to do is irrevocably wrong.

I scan the horizon for alien aircraft, ears tuned for the hum of engines. When I see and hear nothing, I begin digging through my pack.

Samango monkeys were listed as a rare species under CITES Appendix II because they were confined to an ecosystem covering less than 1% of the land area of Southern Africa, the evergreen Afromontane forests. Unlike its close, ubiquitous relative, the vervet monkey, the samango monkey was rarely seen by outsiders.

The sonic shovel looks like an entrenching tool; it folds, and the narrow blade screws onto the handle. It weighs less than a kilogram, but the rigid parts are mono-molecular carbon laminate: it's exceedingly strong, much lighter than the spades and post-hole diggers I used on Mother's hundred-and-fifteen acres in Vermont. That's a thought that comes with a sting; that land isn't there any more, and neither are the shaggy-coated ponies and the long-haired goats that were my childhood companions and chores. Or, more precisely, the land is

When You Visit the Magoebaskloof Hotel Be Certain Not to Miss the Samango Monkeys story: Elizabeth Bear / art: Josh Finney & Kat Rocher of Glitchwerk



JOSH FINNEY 04

still there. But since the Shift, it's not much of a farm. Even a ragged New England farm, clawed from a mountainside.

It amuses me to realize that when the ice goes back – if the ice goes back – four hundred years of plow and pick, of Morgan horses and oxen pulling at their collars, will be undone and the settlers – if there are any settlers – will have to start all over again on a fresh crop of rocks to turn it back into a farm.

I bite the valve and gulp oxygen to ease the straining pressure in my chest. I flip the switch on the shovel's handle before I set it against dirt and stones. The packed soil would be challenging to shift by hand, but technology makes short work of many obstacles. Alas, the ones I need solutions for prove obdurate in the face of technology, and ingenuity too.

I could almost wish that the work were harder. Manual labor is good for stopping thought, but the sonic shovel makes this little more strenuous than walking, even in the thin icy air. And walking is an excellent way to shift one's brain to overdrive.

The samango monkey was larger and darker than the vervet monkey. Its diet consisted largely of fruit and leaves, supplemented by flowers and insects. The Magoebaskloof Hotel in the Limpopo District of South Africa – an eco-tourism desti-

nation – was famous for its samango monkey feeding program, which allowed tourists the chance to see the rare animals up close.

We never understood what a garden was Earth until we got out here where it's cold and strange and nothing wholesome grows. We're going to run out of preserved food sooner rather than later. And the babies have all been stillborn so far, and it's my job to know why, and I just do *not*.

We fired all but blind; it's only luck that the world we aimed for is habitable at all. And it's my job as xenobiologist to keep it that way. To find a way to bend the biochemistry of this planet to our bodies, to remedy the lack of digestible proteins in the native flora, and the prevalence of ever-so-slightly-toxic-to-Earth-life alkaloids. To understand how native intelligence developed, when they're the only *animal* we've found on this planet where even plant life is so sparse.

We have so many lovely theories. The fragmentary fossil record we've uncovered shows a complete ecology until only eyeblinks ago, on a geologic scale. The natives could be the sole survivors of some ecological catastrophe. They could even be the cause of it. Or – the most intriguing possibility – like us, they could come from Somewhere Else. And no matter where



they came from, what happened to everything else?

I wish we knew how to talk to them. Wish we knew if they even have language, when near as I can tell they might communicate by pheromones, or kinetically, via posturing too subtle for us to even notice. It might help us understand why they treated us as long-lost brethren from day one. Until Veronica Chambers – we reconstruct – exhumed one of the veil-marked graves, probably not even knowing what she was digging up, and the natives sliced her very tidily and very thoroughly into bits.

I helped retrieve the corpse. I remember very clearly what her remains looked like. Blood, everywhere. Grey with dust.

But even after that, nothing changed about the friendly unassuming way they treated us. We haven't moved beyond the grunt-and-point-and-occasionally-dismember level of conversation we've achieved. You'd think at least math would transfer, one rock plus one rock equals two rocks. You would think.

There was never any question that the brightly-clad natives were intelligent. They came in strange mechanical craft and greeted us with wonderful gifts from the first day we landed: gracious hosts, utterly without fear, for all we had not found a way to speak with them. It took me some time to understand the simple logic of it; they had no competition on their harsh dry world except the world itself. There were no predators, no other animals, no prey. They dined by poking lichen-covered rocks into the puckered orifices below their nominal chins. The rocks emerged some hours later, polished shiny as agates.

The young were born alive, fed from flat dugs in the crevices between their double-joined arms and their tripartite carapaces.

Their only enemy was the planet, and their supreme allies were each other. It was their biology to make us at home. Or so I thought – assumed, bad scientist – until Veronica.

We have so many lovely theories about how the aliens evolved, where they came from, why they are as oddly peaceable as Emperor penguins, as Galapagos tortoises that have never seen a threat. And I can't explore or disprove any of them unless I can dissect a dead one, and sample whatever it is that they use for genetic material.

I lean on my sonic shovel, considering the mound of dirt between my boots. I'm lucky to have been chosen. Lucky to have gotten a colony ship, at my age. Lucky to be here, brushing soil from the triskelion carapace of some alien mother's child with my fingertips so I don't damage the cadaver with my shovel.

The baby's body is almost half my size and wrapped in more blue cloth, layers of it, spun of the fibers and dyed bright with the sap of those same alien plants that we cannot eat. I edge fingers under the carapace, make sure that the soft and oddly human three-fingered hands stay tucked tight inside the funeral pall, protected when I lift. I have to jump down beside it, like Hamlet with Ophelia, to get enough purchase to haul it up.

I use the shovel as a lever.

When I raise my head to half-roll, half-drag the alien's body out of the grave, I am looking into a dozen triads of eyes.

I guess I picked a bad day to start robbing graves. *I was eleven when I saw my first samango monkey. My mother had brought me to South Africa for an ecology conference. It was not a 'done thing' to bring children to professional conferences in those days – in some ways we did become more enlightened, and more aware that a separation between family and profession can be an artificial stress – but the scientists were very kind. Dr. Martens from UCLA, I remember in particular, introduced me to all the exotic fruits and spices and laughed at the faces I made.*

I, in turn, laughed at the faces the monkeys made. Especially the babies.

The monkeys were rust and silver, ticked with black. Their coats were long, not silky but . . . kinky, like soft, nappy human hair brushed out. They smelled like animals: acrid, musky, unpleasant. The males were almost twice as big as the females, their rough-and-tumble muzzles elongated over enlarged canines. The females had faces as sweet as Barbie dolls and radiant carnelian-colored eyes.

One particular monkey who came to the Magoebaskloof for the feedings had two babies that did not look like each other. While twins were not unheard of, these were not twins. Rather, female samango monkeys – Dr. Martens explained – were extremely maternal; they would even adopt orphaned infants from other troops.

This particular female had adopted an orphaned vervet monkey. I don't know where she found it; I know now that the vervet was more common to the savanna than the Afromontaine. But find it she did, and take it for her own.

I rest the dead alien child carefully on the edge of the grave and look directly at the native standing in front of me. It reaches out with one soft-skinned grey hand. I flinch back, but the touch is gentle. The native, the tallest and broadest of the group, is wrapped in veils of vermilion and cinnamon. No other in the group wears those colors. Or blue, I realize, because that deep, true azure is the color of death to them as surely as red (or black, or white) is the color of death on Earth.

The native hands me out of the grave, lifting me past the body of the child. I leave the shovel behind. It's not heavy enough to make a weapon, and grabbing for it would be obvious.

The biggest native towers over me. It hasn't let go of my hand. I crane back to look up at its elephant-grey head; my level gaze would rest at the v-shaped 'collar' of its carapace. Soft crunching emanates from inside its body; the sounds of its crop, or gizzard, or whatever these creatures stuff full of rocks and then crank like a churn to get their dinners.

"I'm sorry," I say, exactly as if the thing could understand me. One of its three enormous jewel-blue eyes blinks, and I wonder if there's a connection between the blue of the veil and the blue of their eyes. Some symbolism about seeing into the otherworld, perhaps? I don't even know if they believe in an otherworld. I wish I had an anthropologist. Hell, I wish I were an anthropologist. But I'm not, and the native is squeezing, tugging my hand – gently, still, but for how long? – so I keep talking. "I didn't mean any disrespect. But I need a cadaver. To see how your bodies work. If we're going to survive here."

Another eye blinks and re-opens, unhurried. They operate on a cycle: two open, one being cleansed. Or resting. Or something. We've never seen a native sleeping. I wonder if they have tripartite brains – *tritospheres*? What would you call that?

– the same way they seem to have three of everything else. Maybe they sleep like dolphins did on Earth, part of the brain active while the rest dozes –

– I just don't know. There's so much I don't know, that I'm going to die not knowing.

Still holding my right wrist, the native lifts another arm. Wetness spills from the nipple in its underarm, washing dust from the carapace. The shell isn't grey after all; the cloudy fluid looks like whey, but cleans a swath of tortoiseshell amber and black before it soaks into the native's veils.

The native pulls me close. Thin air burns my throat as I struggle, air reeking acrid with the native's stench. I crave oxygen. There's no time to grab my mask.

A clicking grunt, a noise like boulders knocked together. The first non-gastric noise I've heard one make. The others close in around me. I wonder what Veronica did, if this is what she saw before they killed her; the wall of bodies, granite stones wrapped in rainbow gauze. The acrid smell of the native's – milk? The slow meticulous blinking of the third blue eye.

I wonder how much it's going to hurt when they kill me.

It yanks, two hands now. The second one presses my face into the foul-smelling mess dripping down its side. I strain back, but the grip is unbreakable, and the fluid burns my skin when the native shoves me into it.

I whimper like a puppy; the hands are encompassing, one on my wrist, one holding, controlling my head. The milk tastes like ammonia. My eyes tear. The teat is hot and hard against my cheek, like the udders on my mother's goats when they needed milking –

When they needed milking.

Like an orphaned vervet monkey, I understand what the massive creature wants. The fluid filling my mouth is rank and sharp. It burns going down; it might be poison.

Like everything on this planet.

But the natives are smart. Smart enough for hovercraft and holograms. Smart enough for biochemistry. And there is always the possibility, bizarre and remote as it is, that the microscopic flora in mother's milk might work for me as it works for them.

I wonder if they dissected Veronica to learn that.

Whether it works or not, I'll be sick. Really, really sick.

I hope they know what to do with me. I hope they know what they're doing, because sure as Hell, I don't. But I'm learning.

You have to adapt to the place you live in, if you're going to survive outside your environment. Because your environment will not adapt to yoá. We have to give up one home to live in another, so it's just as well we can't go back. We wouldn't recognize the place.

I always did wonder what became of that vervet monkey, growing up in a place God never intended him for.

I saw my first samango monkey in 1999. By the time I left Earth, they were extinct, another victim of the Shift. I don't remember when the species was lost, but I do remember where I was on January 12th, 2004, when my mother handed me a small article on the Magoebaskloof Hotel in Limpopo District, South Africa.

It had burned to the stones the day before. But everybody inside had gotten out alive.

Elizabeth's stories have appeared in publications such as *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* and *SCIFICTION*, and a series of science fiction novels beginning with *Hammered* is forthcoming from Bantam Spectra beginning in January 2005.

NEW FICTION BY DAVID MEMMOTT

CRY OF THE SOUL

(A NOVEL BY DAVID MEMMOTT)

Pulsating drums and thrumming mouth harps awakened in Benito Cortezar a ghost of childhood beckoned by the darkness of manmade rainforest encapsulated behind the misty glass walls of The Sacred Monkey Lounge.

Wilbur Foxx, CEO of Foxx Media International, raised his licuado to toast the man who made it all possible. "To our continued success, Benito," he beamed, "*Saludo, mi amigo.*"

"*Saludo,*" echoed a chorus of luminaries, mellowed by the coffee liquor, mouths watering in expectation of the celebratory feast.

Bennie designed the indoor cabana around a full-sized ceiba tree. With the backing of Foxx Media International, he spared no expense. The tree was dug up from where it grew in the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, hoisted out of the ground by a skycrane hovering like a prehistoric dragonfly over the forest canopy in the Mexican state of Chiapas. A special team

tended to the transfer, busily cleaning and preserving its tangle of roots so it could be airlifted thousands of miles to the Pacific Northwest.

As he thought of it now, Bennie imagined his paternal grandfather, Kayom, might have said, "If the ceiba tree wanted to grow along the Columbia River, it would." Bennie's grandfather well understood some things dug up from the past can alter the future. One of the last Lacandon Maya who refused to surrender the old ways, Kayom understood more than given credit for by Bennie or his parents. The world the old man hoped Bennie could save was gone, fractured into a handful of preserves, the forest choked off by roads and settlements, last remnants of Mayan culture the subject of anthropological studies. Kayom said his people shapeshifted to survive, something Bennie had always taken more metaphorically.

As he swished the rich liquor around in his mouth until

the inside of his cheeks were numb, Bennie realized he didn't much feel like celebrating.

The slender hand of Madeline Foxx found the inside of his leg under the table. Bennie jerked suddenly, hitting his knee on the heavy mahogany. He bit back the pain, blinked and found himself swimming into Madeline's Caribbean blue eyes, widening with sensuous delight. But her attention was distracted as platters of Mayan cuisine were wheeled in: marinated armadillo, shredded wild turkey, crocodile eggs, grouper fillets, grilled macaw, breaded anteater, turtle soup and barbecued peccary strips accompanied by tropical fruit, salads, tortillas, beans, sweet potatoes, squash and peppers all freshly harvested from three levels of humid Sacred Monkey rainforest in the heart of Columbiana. A testament to what money and power could accomplish. It made Madeline coo hungrily.

Bennie had been trained to let go of the past as it held no power over him, yet somehow he feared letting go might leave him too aloof, disconnected from natural world. For most of his adult life he'd turned his back on his Mayan roots, learning from his father to give up that dead world and move into one with a future. He couldn't help feeling he'd failed his teachers. Maja the Matriarch has envisioned Bennie being the circum-polar star at the center of her Virtual Mystery School, but it seemed that failure followed him all his days since his father packed him up and sent him to his grandfather, so Kayom maybe could teach him how to be a man. But Bennie failed in that too. He could not learn to shapeshift. So instead of carrying visions of the future back to a people without one, he'd broken the God Pot. Now his life was like a dugout canoe navigating the high seas when it was only designed for the broad, low rivers of the Ucamacinta delta. Memories like storm-driven waves swamped his fragile buoyancy and not even his training could quell them – memories like the Palenque Project on the day his mother died. The shot still rang in his ears.

After the inaugural feast, a bejeweled Madeline Foxx in her form-fitting gown shimmered like a water sprite, a temptress clutching his arm to steady herself. Though married to the CEO of Foxx Media International, the actress was no man's property. She leaned heavily against him, laughing, as they stumbled past massive glyph platforms and stucco facades leading into the gallery. Bennie felt a slight disturbance like a ripple of cold air which made him suddenly shudder. He ignored it like he always did.

Even one wall of the gallery was glassed-in rainforest all transplanted from his homeland. It bred a special darkness, a place of power filled with the invisible which Bennie neatly folded back into the recesses of his mind though it was always there, waiting just below the surface, as he hosted tipsy celebrities milling about, snacking on hors d'oeuvres and sipping beverages. They all toasted Bennie as he walked by with the actress on his arm. He fretted that maybe he'd become a bit too comfortable with his own celebrity. Feared he might become like them – the rich and famous gathered not to celebrate Bennie's Mayan roots or the opening of the Sacred Monkey Lounge, but to be among the first psychonavigators to pilot FMI's La Ruta Maya Dreamtime.

Even among the dazzle of elites in their finery and the ecstatic intoxication of success, Bennie mind drifted back to old Kayom. His grandfather had opposed the excavation of Temple VIa in the Western Group of ruins at Palenque. He forebode bad luck should the tomb be violated. His mother and father, both educated people, scoffed at this. It didn't fit into their more scientific view of Mayan history. His father, Paal, who'd adopted the Spanish name of Paulo Cortezar, accused Kayom of wishing

for ill fortune to befall them. Refusing to participate in the continuing desecration of Mayan sacred sites even for science and human knowledge, even when the desecration was carried out by his own son and daughter-in-law, Kayom returned to Nahá before Bennie's mother, a Polish-American archeologist, lowered the digital camcorder through a narrow drill hole, revealing Yawat Pixan in his tomb still wearing his death mask.

Then came that day, a day when the sun never shined – the 16th of April, 2007. The rains came early that year. It rained all night before they came, the Insurgents, appearing like phantoms out of a rising mist at the crack of dawn. There was an ominous spell cast over the jungle as the armed rebels surrounded the site and began looting. When one of the Insurgents slipped Yawat Pixan's death mask into a bag and started gathering up his mother's field journals, Freida tore into the man like a killer cat. "No!" she screamed in Spanish, scratching at his eyes. "They're mine. You can't take them." The Insurgent backhanded her across the face. She fell backward. The intense eyes behind the black shroud warned against any interference. "We take back what belongs to the people, graverobber." Paulo rushed to her aid, wrestling with the thief, to take his rifle. It discharged just as his mother regained her feet, shooting her in the chest. Paulo dropped down beside her, crying. Another Insurgent shot him in the back. And all the while Bennie cowered in the corner, too afraid to help. The Insurgents escaped with the death mask, journals and other artifacts, leaving Bennie's mother dead and his father seriously wounded. Paulo never really recovered, becoming a tour guide and spending most of his time drunk and in bed with lonely white women.

Kayom fasted, prayed and journeyed to guide Frieda Gronowski through the lower world, but 12-year-old Bennie, ravaged by guilt and anger, blamed his grandfather. If Kayom was such a powerful *t' o' ohil'*, why couldn't he see the attack coming and warn them? Bennie settled on two possibilities, either his grandfather wanted his mother dead or the old storyteller wasn't so powerful after all. Either way, Bennie lost respect for him and abandoned the old ways.

When the death mask was recovered over twenty years later, Bennie couldn't believe it was the death mask of Yawat Pixan until authorities also returned his mother's journals.

Bennie then arranged with the National Museum in Mexico City to exhibit the mask and other recovered antiquities for a period of two years in the gallery at the Sacred Monkey Lounge. The exhibit fit beautifully into Wilbur Foxx's plans for the Lounge and the upcoming release of FMI's La Ruta Maya Dreamtime.

So again something recovered from the past changed Bennie's future. He spent long days obsessed with details in recovering the past, creating his virtual Dreamtime and surrounding it with nothing less than a destination resort.

He'd not foreseen these twists of fate and doubted that anyone could. Here he was in a multi-million dollar modern pyramid overlooking the Columbia River, standing in a Mayan gallery with a sex goddess clinging to his arm, studying the same jade mosaic deathmask inlaid with gold, mother of pearl and obsidian, except that it was missing one of its eyes. He didn't know how so many paths had converged here at the Sacred Monkey, but he felt it was no accident.

The plaque under the display read: DEATH MASK OF YAWAT PIXAN (CRY OF THE SOUL), PALENQUE, TEMPLE VIA WESTERN GROUP, EXCAVATED IN APRIL, 2007, BY FREIDA GRONOWSKI AND PAULO CORTEZAR. STOLEN APRIL 16, 2007; RECOVERED FROM CATACOMBS OF THE COLONIAL CATHOLIC CHURCH IN SAN CRISTÓBAL, OCTOBER 10, 2031.

It was a fitting memorial. Bennie thought his mother would

have approved. Then he heard a jaguar scream. He knew it was a jaguar because of the way it sent shivers throughout his body. He'd heard the sound before when he was with his grandfather in the jungles of Chiapas. He looked around, blinking. There were no jaguars listed among the cloned endangered and extinct species being preserved in the Sacred Monkey rainforest, but he instinctively peered through the glass into the stippled shadows beyond, alert to something dark and dissatisfied, maybe within himself, looking for a chance to pounce. He thought it must be another memory like the ringing in his ears of the fatal gunshot, called forth from the back of his mind as he strolled with Madeline through displays of Palenque stelae, carved reliefs, pottery, sculptures, jewelry and other artifacts.

"It's too crowded in here, my Feathered Serpent." Madeline cooed into his ear, angel-eyes mildly dilated from too much liquor. She stroked his arm lasciviously. Her schooled fingers, soft and lemony, caressed his skin. While her filthy-rich husband completed formal rounds as CEO of the billion dollar entertainment empire that bankrolled the Sacred Monkey, Madeline focused on more immediate returns, like being one of the first to pilot their exciting new product. "Guide me into your Dreamtime," she murmured.

Bennie heard another scream, louder and closer. Disengaging Madeline's hands from his arm, he turned suddenly. A rushing jaguar ripped toward him through palm fronds and fern leaves, leaping at the same instant Bennie's breath caught in his throat. The cat vanished in mid-air before striking glass, leaving Bennie transfixed, staring into the misty spray of microjets on a timer.

As dense cloud parted, Benito beheld a stunning panorama of emerald forest flecked with golden hardwoods reflected in the mirror towers along the skyline of the Columbia Gorge. It looked almost like the Sacred Monkey forest though most of the transplanted tropical species wouldn't have survived the winters here.

"Of course we appreciate all you've done, Benito." Foxx turned from the picture window on the 71st floor of the West Willamette Tower, casting a long shadow over Bennie's face. "But the Board feels it's in the best interests of FMI to incorporate our new Total Immersion Primers into the virtual scenarios."

Taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly, Bennie remained cool and detached, though internal winds were kicking up some serious dust. "Why would the Board want La Ruta Maya Dreamtime set up for Total Immersion if we plan the release for home systems? How can we scale down the portals?"

"They won't need the portals," Foxx answered, patting the black leather of a prototype lounge, inviting Bennie to sit.

Perplexed, Bennie let himself be guided into the lounge. He did not resist as Foxx gently pushed him back into the plush pillow and crowned him with wireless headgear. Bennie suddenly he felt sunlight streaming through his lightweight baja.

"Try some samplers." Foxx said, "And when you're ready to exit, just say or think the word, *Kukulcan*."

Bright sun and white sand blinded him. A tropical breeze played the palm trees like reed instruments. The sudden heat penetrated his lungs as though he'd walked into a sauna. Waves of stunningly blue water rushed the shore. He was reclining in a lounge wearing a sexy woman's body glistening with tanning lotion, wearing a string bikini. A man in a wetsuit approached, leaning over him with hot breath scorching Bennie's ear, "You're so hot, baby, you make us hard as a rock."

The sudden intense desire to surrender to the man so startled Bennie that he instinctively uttered *Kukulcan*. Once out of the program, he blinked repeatedly, gulping air as if drowning in

an unexpectedly homophobic alarm. "What was that?"

"One of our new models. What do you think?"

"It was Madeline. I was in her body," Bennie said.

"Actually it was Madeline in her role as Elsa 'Rosalie' Banister from the 2021 veri-HD interactive holo-remake of the colorized 1948 Orson Welles classic, *The Lady From Shanghai*. Will stated, proudly. "Just think of it. Any man now can gain the understanding of Tiresias, without having a sex change."

Madeline Foxx was the subject of many fantasies by both men and women. Bennie had never imagined the power of all that passion, never before experienced such a feeling of restrained arousal. It was irresistible. He'd felt instantly absorbed into her, losing sense of himself. He blinked again. His eyes were watering. "FMI's planning to market this?"

Will nodded, slipping a marble-sized crystal ball into a transparent tube. It rattled down and clicked into a frame. "Try another."

He was in Palenque. From the grandeur and style of the temples and palaces, he guessed the time was prior to 800 AD. It was one of the milieus he'd developed from his mother's journals, based extensively on her detailed research and restoration work in Meso-America. But it was different, enhanced, sharper and more tangible than his Dreamtime. No physical real-world restoration could ever compare with this artistic rendition.

A bright moon waxed overhead. He was in the body of a sacrificial victim, held down on a stone altar. His heart pounded. A Mayan lord dressed in plumed headdress stood over him with an obsidian knife glinting with moonlight. He plunged the blade forcefully into Bennie's chest. Bennie's breath exploded in a silent scream. The word *Kukulcan* formed in his mind. He exited.

"My God, Will. What have you done to my milieus?" Bennie bolted upright, fighting for air, face flushed.

Will lifted an eyebrow. "*Your* milieus? Read your contract. They belong to FMI. And the Board felt they needed a bit more drama to reach our target audience."

"I thought the restorations for La Ruta Maya were supposed to be as authentic as possible so users could experience them in Dreamtime, taking some of the tourist pressure off the real sites?"

"In theory, yes, but your work is too scholarly. We have to give them something more. Face it, Benito, excursion subscribers aren't going to pay to walk through an empty plaza, to behold the restoration of a Classic Mayan site no matter how tangible and documented your suppositions might be. We need to prime their pumps. That's our business. Shock some pulse out of them, make them want to come. La Ruta Maya must be real adventure. The Board feels if subscribers enter Dreamtime in these new Primers we can soup up the dramatic content and really explode their realities. Your milieus and our primers – we'll make a fortune."

Bennie grimaced, rubbing his sore chest with the heel of his hand. "I never felt anything like that before without a Total Immersion portal." Lifting his baja, he found a nasty red welt corresponding to the entrypt of the obsidian blade. The stigmata faded almost immediately, but his heart still pounded.

Late afternoon sun radiated off white limestone. The splendor of the Mayan regional center, Xunantunich, with sun-washed pyramids and painted roof combs, brought back by the power of Bennie's imagination and his mother's painstaking research would've taken her breath away. If only she could've seen it. Dark interiors of stone temples framed by lintels carved with glyphs and feathered figures, broad stone stairways, raised green terraces, wide open plazas and rows of stelae. Dreamtime had

brought the ninth century AD virtually into the present.

From his vantage atop the pyramid, Bennie cast his eyes some eighty meters below where the Mopan River alternated between cascading waterfalls with rainbow mist and lazy gliding passages cutting limestone through humid jungle. The moving boundary washed out into lower resolution where the Mopan merged with the Macal, giving it the appearance of a natural hazy distance. Earlier, he'd followed the river downstream and was astonished with the smooth transitions as Dreamtime automatically reconfigured so the Macal emerged into sharper detail. He could've followed the dense rainforest of mahogany, cedar, palms and rubber trees all the way down to the Carribean. A vast world of unexpressed detail unfolded in conformity to the presence of the FMI primer as if it were curving space around it. He climbed down the bank and sat on a rock, cooling his feet in a backwater pool. It was like he'd awakened in a totally new world.

Bennie knew if FMI had their way this new world would only serve as exotic backdrop for acting-out human fantasy adventures of war and sex, ritual sacrifice and bloodletting.

An iguana sunning on a rock beside him rolled its slow neon eye up and held him in its gaze. The backwater mirrored an image that took Bennie by surprise. The rippling image was that of his paternal grandfather. It took a minute for it to sink in – the image was his own reflection. Bennie hadn't chosen Kayom as a public self. He couldn't. His grandfather had no matrix model for Dreamtime, let alone a primer. Kayom was not even known to the Caretaker.

Bennie heard the scream of a jaguar, then realized it was only the roar of black howler monkeys. As magnificent as his first glimpse of bright parrots, macaws and toucans had been, exploding out of virtual jungle, skimming trees, they did not startle him nearly as much as his unbidden appearance as Kayom. Taking the form of his grandfather clearly violated the parameters of the program; it just couldn't happen. He wondered if his presence in NuXunantunich brought back such powerful memories of his grandfather that the Caretaker utilized these somehow to crack open his reality?

Bennie was born in Costa Rica where his parents moved after they were married. They spent the dry seasons at various government-sanctioned digs in Palenque, the Usumacinta drainage and the Maya Biosphere Reserve. His parents hardly ever spoke of Kayom until an especially trying period of adolescence and the conflict between Bennie and his father prompted Paulo to ship his son off to the old clan leader for a few months of respite – from each other.

Bennie remembered Kayom meeting him at the small airstrip. The old man refused to utter the boy's Spanish name and called him by his Mayan name, Lak-il K'uh, God Pot, the clay incense burner the Lacadones used to transmit offerings to the gods. Bennie was disappointed. He'd imagined a more colorful name, something with dignity, like Jaguar Moon. He'd always wanted to be a jaguar. Kayom explained Lak-il K'uh was like the God Pot because he would carry the prayers and dreams of the Lacadones in his heart until the time was right to bring them back into the world. The dying spirit of the Hach Winik would migrate into the God Pot after their beloved forest was destroyed. The day would come when Lak-il K'uh would open his heart and release the spirits of his people into a restored world. Bennie, of course, thought this was a bunch of hooey. The old man was just a silly old clown.

Sitting beside the virtual stream, Bennie felt a strange sensation. He determined it felt as if someone was watching him. He climbed warily back up the steep path which led to a wind-

ing narrow staircase. The top of the hill leveled off into a plaza crowned with the magnificent high palace – A-6 or El Castillo – placed on a high substructure fifty meters above the plaza.

From here, Bennie held his vigil. He was about to give up and exit the program when he glimpsed a shadowy figure enter the narrow vaulted passage running south to north through the second level of the palace. His La Ruta Maya wasn't yet open to excursionists. Who could've gained access without going through him? Will? He didn't think so. He couldn't shake the feeling that he'd brought along this shadow when he immersed himself in the powerful primer. He had the thought that maybe FMI had unknowingly introducing something alien into Dreamtime, something they hadn't planned on, something maybe each and every visitor carried inside themselves like Bennie carried the ghost of Kayom, who'd vanished twenty-five years ago in the rainforest.

Bennie peered into the darkness within the palace and the scent of sweet copal incense greeted him. The light of the setting sun cast him into silhouette as he entered, eyes stinging from smoke.

Keeping with tradition, old Kayom sponsored Lak-il K'uh in his passage into manhood. They lived and hunted in the Chiapas rainforest, visiting sacred sites. Kayom told him stories passed down through generations, taught him power songs, how to share long silences filled with jungle sounds, to close his eyes and visualize the source of each, until the boy could segregate one from the other by focusing his mind, until he could single out the scratching of the raccoon-like White-nosed Coatis from the hoopla of howlers spotting a stalking jaguar. As stubborn as the old man was about maintaining his traditions, he spoke fluent Spanish and often surprised the boy with his eloquence. From the ruins of Yaxchilán, Palenque and finally Xunantunich, Lak-il K'uh and Kayom traveled together, eating tortillas, tropical fruit, meat of wild birds, drinking balche and smoking large leafs of tobacco rolled into fat cigars until Lak-il K'uh's vision blurred and his stomach roiled.

Even with all he'd learned from Kayom, Lak'il K'uh failed a great test – he was never able to shapeshift. No matter how much he wanted to please his grandfather, he couldn't let himself go, just couldn't bring himself to trust the spirits. He kept wondering what would happen if he couldn't return to his real form.

Kayom was patient, explaining to Lak-il K'uh his fears were based on a perception of being separate from nature. He told the boy his people had come down out off the pyramid to be part of the world, no better and no lesser than any other living thing. The boy just couldn't get it. He couldn't surrender his self long enough to become *Other*. Embarrassed and humiliated, he knew he'd disappointed his grandfather. Nothing hurt so much as that. The people's godpot couldn't even shapeshift! It was a travesty. So in a fit of juvenile rage, he broke the godpot his grandfather gifted him.

With quiet dignity, Kayom asked the gods for forgiveness then assured Lak-il K'uh he wouldn't succeed until he did it for the right reason.

"What reason is that?" Lak-il K'uh asked.

"You'll know when the time comes."

Sitting atop El Castillo in Dreamtime, Bennie remembered how agile his grandfather was, twenty years ago, scrambling up the steep steps of the pyramid without even panting while Bennie, breathlessly scraping his belly raw, hugged eroded stone, afraid of falling.

They sat side by side on a platform. Kayom presented Bennie

with what he called a sorcerer's stone and related the century-old legend of the miraculous appearance of the 'stone maiden' who'd inspired the name *Xunan Tunich*. Kayom said the stone was originally from the pyramid but washed with time into the Mopan River and downstream, worn round and smooth like an old soul. But the stone was strangely green while the stone of the pyramid was mostly white. Kayom said the stone had the power to change Bennie into a jaguar.

Six months after Bennie returned home to Costa Rica, his mother was dead and his grandfather vanished into the rainforest.

The sorcerer's stone was long forgotten when some years back Bennie dreamed he and Kayom were sitting together atop El Castillo at Xunantunich much as he was now in Dreamtime sitting in the form of his grandfather. With his marriage failing, his coffee plantation in Costa Rica near bankruptcy, disillusioned with the inadequacy of his Western/Christian upbringing to address the stresses of the time, he welcomed the dream. Kayom told him a secret: the stone maiden of Xunantunich was not a ghost from the past, as many surmised, but a goddess from the future, from a time when the earth would be threatened and his people called upon to teach humanity the reason the Mayans eventually left the cities, melting over time back into the rainforest.

Learned white explorers, Kayom explained in the dream, explorers like Bennie's own mother, Frieda, had attempted to piece together the story of a whole civilization from the fragments they'd unearthed. For many years it was believed the cities had been suddenly and mysteriously abandoned. They couldn't imagine the savages living in the jungles could have descended from the builders of these cities, or from their stories understood what had really happened. "They believed we must have inherited their great works, that this great legacy was eventually corrupted by an ignorant people who overpopulated, exhausted their resources and became sick. The original civilization must have been destroyed by feuding regional centers fighting for control, or brought to ruin like Atlantis by earthquakes and volcanoes. One after another these scholars theorized famine, flood, and disease, which were disasters suffered by our people, but they never understood these disasters were only symptoms, not causes."

"What was the cause?" Bennie asked.

"The Maya left the great centers to rediscover what they'd lost – *spirit*. The Dreamers saw the end coming in their visions. They spoke of their visions, telling all who'd listen that they'd built a false dream, a dream perfectly embodied in the form of a pyramid, a structure that elevates a powerful elite, a vision that places man at the top, next to gods that live in the sky. To survive what would come, the people must go back down and learn to restore the balance."

Remembering that dream now in Dreamtime, sitting atop El Castillo in the form of his grandfather, seemed most ironic to Bennie, considering the great pyramid built by FMI to house The Sacred Monkey, with its manmade rainforest below and the Dreamtime Lounge on top where people would come to cross into virtual worlds, travel through time, take on new forms, which might yet lead to still one more evolutionary step for human *being*.

Then he caught a whiff of smoke – tobacco smoke, not burning incense.

His paternal grandmother, Nuk, once told him years after Kayom vanished, that she would sometimes smell tobacco smoke and knew it was her husband checking on her, that it would be just like Kayom to manifest such an odor, knowing

how much his smoking annoyed her.

Bennie looked around but saw no one. Again he wondered if the Dreamtime program was manifesting his memories. A cool breeze caressed his cheeks. Then he caught another whiff. A man in traditional white tunic wearing Yawat Pixan's death mask appeared quite unexpectedly, startling Bennie. It was the same mask of mosaic jade and shell with one round stone eye missing. The man removed the death mask. His grandfather grinned, arching eyebrows clownishly, as though making faces in a mirror and Bennie strangely felt his own facial muscles twitch in response as though he were telerobotically controlled by his grandfather's antics. Finally Bennie stammered, "W-what are you d-doing here?"

"The spirits have their fun," Kayom said, cackling with mischief. He held the death mask in his lap. "Did I surprise you?" He pulled his tunic up over his knees and stretched his legs. They sat side by side in identical poses, looking like escapees from a mental ward, gazing out over the virtual river valley, enjoying the warm sun.

Bennie's father, Paulo, never wore traditional Mayan dress. He thought it drew too much attention. Too many indigenous people had nearly been wiped out in genocidal campaigns of governments and rebels in Guatemala and Mexico. He preferred the anonymity of sweatpants, t-shirts and tennis shoes.

Kayom wiggled bare toes playfully, open smile broadcasting an open heart. His shoulder-length black hair was straight and shiny, the sharp clarity of his hawk-like eyes gazed out from a mahogany complexion. He sucked on a fat cigar, chest expanding as he inhaled. A stream of smoke snaked away under Bennie's nose on a gentle breeze. Kayom licked his lips. "I'd forgotten the taste of tobacco."

"Tobacco isn't good for you," Bennie responded automatically.

Kayom laughed. "So, Lak-il K'uh, you remembered." His light voice spoke perfect English.

"Of course I remember you, grandfather," Bennie replied.

"No, I mean you remember what we talked about." Kayom held the rolled tobacco loosely between thumb and forefinger. The brown stains betrayed that he'd never broken the habit. "Tell me what you have learned."

Bennie thought a moment, closing his eyes and feeling the sun on his eyelids. "If there's anything I've learned from past civilizations, it is that those who see themselves as rising above nature can lose their sense of place in nature. Their collective dream of dominance over nature, over the animal, over the *feminine*, becomes a war on the wild nature in themselves. They will no longer see themselves *of the earth*, but rather seek to ascend to the stars. Their social structures will tend to take the form of a male hierarchy in which their gods come from the sky. I am of the earth and know we need not give it up to experience the stars."

Kayom broke into a proud grin, then started singing, addressing the gods, *Hach Ak Yum, Itza Noh K'uh*, beseeching them, asking again for their forgiveness of his grandson. He did not mean to break the godpot.

"Grandfather, tell me, who are The Dreamers?" Bennie asked Kayom as they sat side by side atop the pyramid, El Castillo, in NuXunantunich.

Kayom's cheeks sucked-in as he inhaled smoke from his rolled tobacco cigar, centered himself as he held the smoke in his lungs, then exhaled, pondering the skein of smoke twisting away in the wind. "Do you remember the stories I told you about the arrival of the *conquistadores* and the downfall of Tenochtitlan?"

"Yes, how Moctezuma believed Cortés was Quetzalcoatl?"

How the mangod came back to punish him for distorting his spiritual message into justification for ritual slaughter?"

In Bennie's youth, Kayom related how Moctezuma, ruler of the Aztec empire, had been trained in the religion of Quetzalcoatl, a religion of spiritual transcendence that flowered into a peaceful civilization of master builders and craftsmen who forbade the practice of human sacrifice. But the Aztec were a warring people, conquering other city-states, exacting tribute and formalizing a State religion around elaborate rituals of sacrifice to sustain their bloodthirsty Sun god, Huitzilopochtli. For ten years before the Spaniards' 'moving mountains' landed near present-day Veracruz, there had been omens of disaster. Moctezuma called upon his prophets and priests and seers, most all of them trained in the old ways of Quetzalcoatl, to ascertain his fate and that of the Aztec people. Each Dreamer who related an ominous vision was cruelly dispatched in what came to be known as The Massacre of the Dreamers.

"Don't kill the messenger," Kayom quipped, then leveled a steady gaze into the eyes of his mirror self, "but The Massacre of the Dreamers was only one event in an ongoing war on a way of knowing, a terrible apocalypse that destroyed the old believers all over the world for hundreds . . . maybe thousands of years through witch trials and the subjugation of Goddess cultures, not only driving the seers and the prophets underground but suppressing these abilities in human kind, burning down the temples, closing the doors of the Mystery Schools and chopping heads off oracles, mostly under the sponsorship of State religion."

"What does this have to do with The Dreamers now?"

"This war is not only being fought against humans but against anything with a *wild* nature. The same path that narrows down human vision into a single track, into a predictable future, with the help of the spirits has led out the other side and opened up a new space. It is through that opening that the voices of The Dreamers are again being heard. Humankind has a choice to hear them or not. Those who do will be led through to another world while those who don't will decay until their world collapses around them. The time has come for a change of worlds."

As Kayom prayed, his voice changed into that of a woman, his body into that of Bennie's mother, a beautiful Polish-American woman with long onyx hair and bewitching eyes of smoky quartz. She wore a black dress with silver belt and necklace of silver and turquoise that made her look Native American. She lifted her face, closed her eyes and absorbed the sunlight. Her shapely legs were stretched out like his, dress pulled up over her knees.

She stopped singing and held Bennie in a long, steady gaze. "Your grandfather was a very wise man."

Bennie was so startled by her appearance all he could blubber was, "Mother?"

She patted him on the knee and smiled, "You expected Kayom. I didn't want to disappoint you. He's what you think a wise old *brujo* should look like."

The spirits had fooled him before. When he was learning to journey with the aid of a drum, he was supposed to journey to the upper world and find a teacher. He came upon this grisly old man in the desert, dirty, half-naked, showing ribs as if half-starved, sitting among shards of broken pottery, scraggly long hair, smoking a peacepipe. Bennie asked if he was his teacher. The old man's blistered lips stretched into a toothless grin. He raised a trembling finger and pointed to a beautiful woman in Egyptian garb, wearing a bead collar with amulet, her eyes heavily shadowed. She twittered with much amusement. "You wouldn't have believed I am your teacher," she said, "But you

don't need the energy of the wise old man. You need the energy of the goddess."

"How did you find me?" Bennie asked his mother. "I mean in Dreamtime?"

"I am energy," Frieda responded. "Energy can go anywhere, even here."

"So . . ." Bennie said with a straight face, ". . . are you just passing through?"

She laughed, then pursed her lips, becoming very serious – scary serious. "They're coming. We can't keep them from coming. We need your help." With a wave of her hand, she directed his eyes to the rainforest below. He felt a slight tremor. "Do you know why so few learn to shapeshift?"

"Because they lack discipline, desire?"

"Oh, there's no lack of desire, Bennie. There's no lack of disciples who all want to learn to shapeshift. They work very hard at it. No, it's because they wish to *become* shapeshifters."

Bennie nodded, understanding, "Instead of *being* shapeshifters?"

Frieda smiled. "Yes, they're held back by believing they need to stop being *one* thing to become something wholly other. Each of us are *all* things already. To be a jaguar, Bennie, you must first realize you're already a jaguar then learn to shift your attention."

The slight tremors were accompanied by movement in the rainforest that conjured images of King Kong ripping through trees.

"The spirit world is much like the rainforest, Bennie, and with this," she said, gesturing to the virtual world around them, "you have fulfilled Kayom's prophecy. You have moved into a space that borders the spirit world in such a way that the Hach Winik and many others can return for awhile to the forest. It think you would call them *bleedthroughs*. They can't stay there forever. If the richness of this space is discovered by the wrong people, they will only see to cut down the mahogany and cedar, burn away what they can't haul out and sell, farm it until the soil no longer sustains a crop, then plant some genetically-altered grass and bring in hybridized cattle until the grass is gone and the land is dead. And I won't be able to visit you again. This space where we can meet will be gone."

The trembling grew into a quaking.

"But how can the spirit world disappear? You can't destroy spirit."

"No, but you can drive it deeper into the jungle, make it harder to reach, destroy the portals and bridges, the *knowledge of how to enter it*. When greed and ignorance destroyed the rainforest, spirits of the jaguar, eagle, ocelot, iguana, crocodile, spider monkey could no longer present themselves and the Hach Winik were cut off – their souls withered and died."

His mother leaned back, closed her eyes and started to sing again. Spirits were crying from the forest or, more correctly, the forest was crying. A brilliant sun splashed against the impenetrable canopy and the air filled with a cacophony of anxious birds shooting into air like fireworks from the jungle below.

The quaking grew intense. Bennie felt it through stone. He instinctively glanced up and saw a bright green parrot circling. Frieda seemed to be calling to it in song. The parrot dropped down onto a large glyph on the west-facing frieze of El Castillo, yellow eyes watching intently, almost ruefully. *Craaak*. It sounded the alarm, flapping wings.

"I know," his mother answered the parrot, "They've opened the gates to paradise."

The parrot dived to another part of the frieze, near a sun-god glyph, tilted its head, listening to Frieda, then screamed. A second parrot landed.

A third.

A fourth.

Within minutes, the west frieze was covered with red, green and yellow parrots, raucously complaining. Suddenly they fell silent. Bennie heard a howl.

A white wolf broke from the jungle below into the clearing, running to the stairway of the main plaza, frightened, lost, out of place.

Then it vanished.

Light faded.

Night descended.

Milky Way stardust smeared the sky and a luminous half-moon cast light onto the plaza below.

The earth again trembled, cracklines through the plaza split and widened. Light poured out of the chasm, drowning the soft light of stars with powerful beacons. Multi-colored cartoon-like high-rise data structures erupted like fantastic beanstalks, shooting up and up, all around them.

Atop the pyramid, they were dwarfed by two-dimensional skyscrapers. The plaza below was a busy intersection of virtual datastreams. Digitized bits of encrypted code coursed through com lines and fibre optic freeways with jammed off ramps. Commercial strips with glitzy clubs and seedy bars with neon signs blinking GIRLS, GIRLS, GIRLS, unrolled like concrete carpet with traffic already stalled. Whacked-out cartoon characters shaking fists from windows of cartoon taxicabs careened with virtual speed off pinball bumpers into blackholes. A sidestreet was blocked off with barriers of yellow and black under-construction signs.

Bennie and his mother climbed down from the pyramid and picked their way through morphing vehicles, loud trolleys filled with Loony Toons and walked right through the barriers without even being noticed. They were virtually invisible to these two-dimensionals.

On the outskirts of an extruded Toontown, an army of worker toons busily erected walls around the datascape so it resembled a frontier fort. Industrious little ants and cockroaches swarmed over the wall – building, building, building. Bennie realized it would take more than words to stop this invasion of Dreamtime. Even if he won a legal battle or two, it would be like chopping one leg off a millipede.

In the blockhouse facing the jungle were Bugs Bunny, Elmer Fudd, Huckleberry Hound and Yogi Bear supervising the nanobot workforce. As Bennie maneuvered closer, he noticed the wall shudder.

He focused on the wall. It was constructed out of a conglomeration of virtual material. His La Ruta Maya had been rolled up into some monstrosity of perverted nature. Fragments of carefully-reconstructed verisimilitude – ripped out mahogany trees, jungle plants, dismembered animals and a mishmash of stones and bones – were grotesquely enmeshed with red and green fiber optic cable, razor wire, video screens winking on and off, and the whole mess oozed blood and oil.

Bennie could barely blink he was so confused.

Frieda shook her head in disgust and began to fade away like the stone maiden of *Xunan Tunich*. She beckoned to Bennie, saying, "Listen for the Cry of the Soul, Bennie. Listen for Yawat Pixan."

Bennie couldn't understand how this monolithic virtual Toontown had extruded through the rainforest of Dreamtime, had broken through his firewall. Then he saw a terrifying sight.

A swarm of nanobots were lifting the decapitated head of the white wolf into place on the wall.

Bennie's stomach tightened.

Bare spots were shaved into the white wolf's fur to attach

pulsing fibre optic cables and some kind of remote button box. Connective cable anchored its skull. Once keen eyes were dull and glassy, unblinking with digital scrolls. The wolf's mouth opened and repeated over and over: "*Welcome to the Sacred Monkey Lounge: working to make the world safe for virtuality.*"

Bennie reached out to touch the suffering animal, its head still alive, fur matted around bleeding wounds. He stroked its bloody muzzle.

The white wolf's tongue unrolled and on it was a small round stone.

Bennie took the stone and turned to his mother.

She was gone.

"Kukulcan," he shouted, "Kukulcan."

Instead of exiting the program, Bennie found himself back atop the pyramid. No Toontown or white wolf could be seen. The moon shone brightly down onto the plaza.

A warm breeze washed over the peaceful green jungle and broke like a wave against *El Castillo*.

Two people strolled casually with arms around each other, heading his way.

Bennie unclenched his fist and gazed at the green stone, round and smooth. It seemed to have been shaped for his hand. He focused, as Kayom taught him, through the stone to the sound of voices until he separated them from jungle sounds. An image formed in his mind. The female was Madeline Foxx. He had trouble identifying the other voice, a male. Then the image came and he blinked in disbelief – it was a primer of himself. Someone had assumed his form and was leading Madeline Foxx to the palace and, from the cooing sultry teasing back and forth, it wasn't to gaze at the moon.

Sacred Monkey Gallery was dauntingly quiet. Bennie used his passkey to enter the main exhibition room and headed directly to the death mask of Yawat Pixan on the wall. He respectfully removed it. Opening his hand, he regarded the small round green stone he'd compressed tightly in his fist. Pinching it between his thumb and forefinger, he placed the stone into the empty slot of the missing eye. It fit perfectly. Without thinking, he put the mask on. And felt himself begin to change.

In his executive suite on the 71st floor of the Willamette Tower, Wilbur Foxx received yet another report of an attack by a renegade virtual jaguar in the NuXunantunich Dreamtime. It was the fourth this month. Since Benito Cortezar vanished, the La Ruta Maya scenarios had begun to deteriorate. Wilbur Foxx could find no one with enough knowledge to maintain them. A search of Benito's suite had not turned up Freida's missing journals. Much like the real site, the virtual pyramids, palaces and plazas of NuXunantunich began to crumble. Roots of tropical vegetation and gangrenous lichens penetrated exposed stone. Unique structures, friezes and facades began to fracture as if from high humidity and frequent rainfall. The mathematically correct virtual legacy of the Mayan world was being degraded by excursionists, looking for excitement, adventure, even at the risk of psychic attacks and stigmatic effects. For every documented attack, there were hundreds of refunds; for every refund, countless sightings of Yawat Pixan, the Cry of the Soul, with his glowing green eyes.

David has published three books of poetry and a collection of stories. He is a Rhysling Award winner and also a short-story award winner through Worldwide Writers Inc. published in England. He recently completed his first SF novel, *Home For Living Legends*. He's the editor/publisher of *Wordcraft of Oregon* and co-edited with Chris Reed the anthology *Angel Body and Other Magic for the Soul* (BBR Publications).

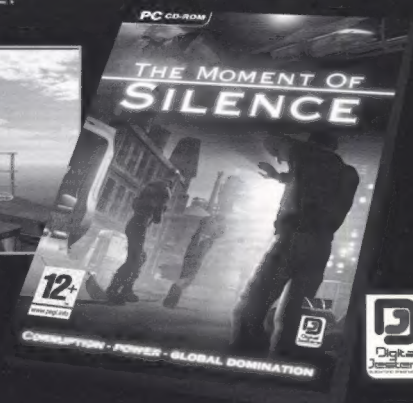


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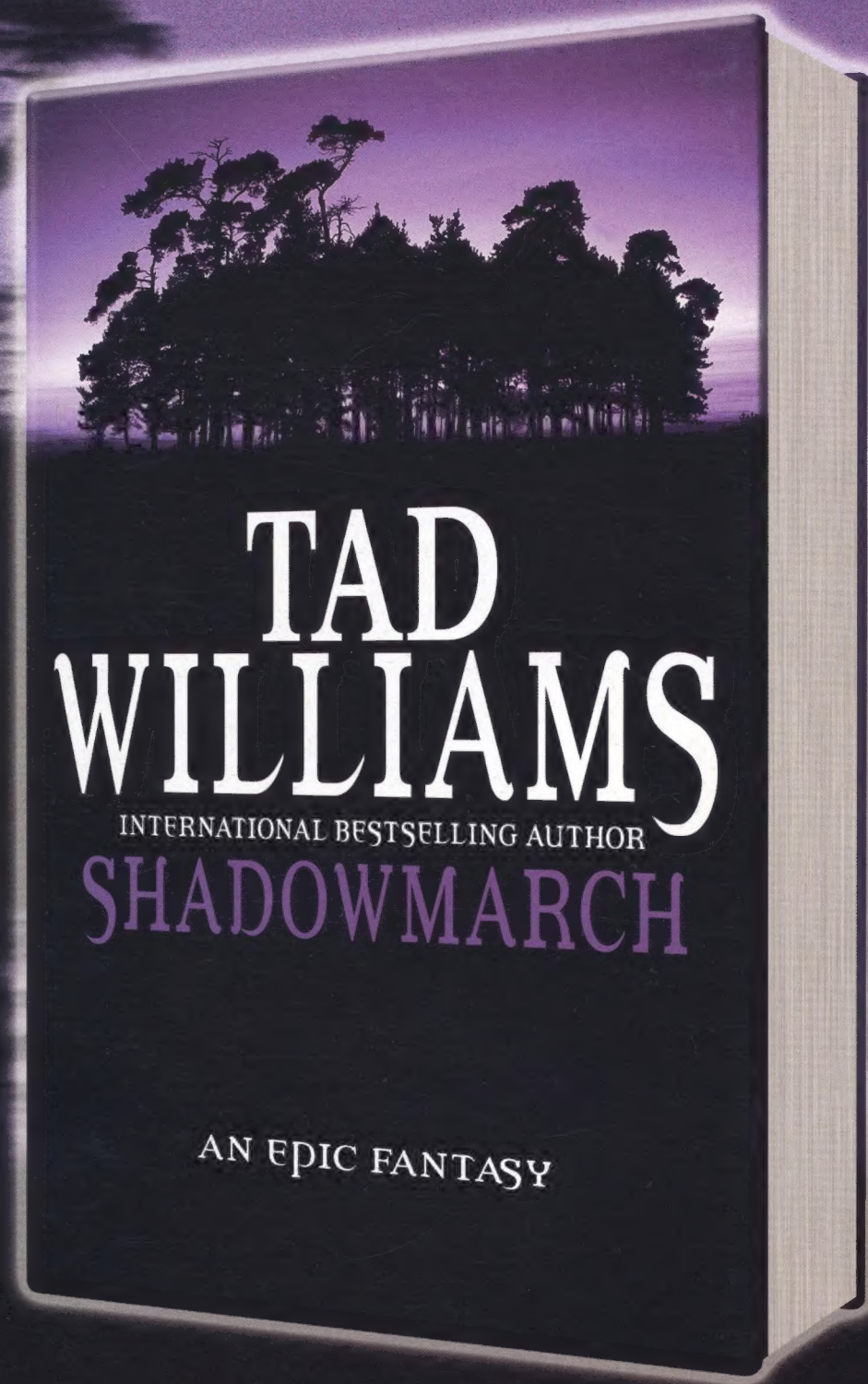
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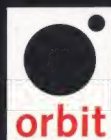


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